

A DO-IT-YOURSELF PROFESSIONAL CODE FOR THE MILITARY

by

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From articles in service journals and questions raised on visits at senior military schools, I get the impression that the issue of a behavioral code for the military profession is still very much alive.¹ A frequent complaint I hear is that no visible progress is being made toward such a code, and that meanwhile career officers are left without authoritative guidance in resolving the many moral dilemmas that have been troubling them since the Vietnam War.

When asked for examples of their problems, they cite situations that arise in their daily lives and also hypothetical cases that may occur in future wars. Many deplore the decline of the reputation of the career officer for reliability in word and deed, and wonder how to restore that hallmark of the profession. Some lament that many senior officers, being mediocre themselves, prefer mediocrity around them, and assemble sycophantic officers on their staffs who withhold unpleasant facts and carefully avoid recommendations contrary to the chiefs' biases and predilections. How can a conscientious officer who does his duty and expects the same from others survive in such an environment?

Many officers, convinced of the failure of the All-Volunteer Force, cannot understand why their superiors continue to support a policy which, as they see it, is clearly detrimental to the readiness of the Army.

What can a junior officer do to rectify a situation like this?

As for moral problems likely to arise in future wars, a frequent question concerns the proper behavior of an officer required to serve in a Vietnam-type war which appears unjust or unjustified to a large sector of the American public. Also, there are questions about the possibility of finding oneself in a war of aggression of the kind condemned by the Nuremberg tribunal and the United Nations Charter.

Likewise, there is always the situation of the officer in combat who receives a lawful order to undertake a difficult mission with inadequate resources and certainty of failure and heavy casualties among his men. Somewhat similar is the quandary which might arise for a NATO officer ordered to use tactical nuclear weapons to repel a massive conventional attack, possibly thereby setting off a general nuclear war that might destroy humanity.

It is not easy to give satisfactory answers to sincere officers raising such questions. As these officers point out, there are no official texts or authoritative codes to which to refer, and possibly there never will be.

In this predicament, I can suggest only that they try working out for themselves a code of conduct that might help them cope with their ethical problems—one which they would consider worthy of adoption by the

entire officer corps. This is the do-it-yourself approach to a professional ethic which I recommend for serious consideration.

The starting point of such an effort would be to arrive at an accepted standard of excellence for an ideal officer in the military profession. I would propose the following: an ideal officer is one who can be relied upon to carry out all assigned tasks and missions and, in doing so, get the most from his available resources with minimum loss and waste. Such resources might include men, money, weapons, equipment, allies, time, space, geography, and weather.

With this standard established, the next step would be to form a mental picture of an officer who would satisfy its terms, and then decide on his likely predominant traits. In forming this picture, we may be guided by our personal observations of admirable officers and by historical studies of outstanding military leaders.

Obviously, such an officer would be deeply convinced of the importance of the military profession and its role in the protection of the nation and its interests. He would view himself as a lineal descendant of the warrior who, in company with the king, the priest, and the judge, has performed throughout history a primal function essential to the survival and well-being of civilization. While the means and methods of arms have constantly changed over time, the need for leaders of valor and character to protect the valuables of society from predatory enemies has remained unchanged. The American officer today may properly derive great pride from belonging to a profession charged with the defense of the nation, with its rich assets, far-flung interests, and unique obligations as a world power. Recognizing this, we may expect our model officer to be endowed with a profound feeling of vocation and pride of membership in the military fraternity.

Such feelings will, of necessity, be accompanied by a determination on his part to succeed in this profession and to make a maximum contribution to its national role. He recognizes that success will depend on his

ability to carry out all missions assigned by proper authority—tasks ranging from the modest duties of a platoon leader all the way to the weighty responsibilities of a senior field commander. In short, he takes the established standard for his goal and undertakes to meet its conditions.

The requirement that he get the most from his resources obliges him to begin with himself. For this purpose, he takes complete professional fitness in all of its aspects as his permanent personal goal. This means that he must not only know his current job, but must constantly prepare for the next one. He will need an orderly, well-trained mind housed in a vigorous body, the whole surmounted by an indomitable spirit that bespeaks strong character and will.

Such fitness can be obtained and retained only by sustained personal effort. Our excellent military school system, tiered in phase with increasing rank and responsibility, is of inestimable value, but it merely lays the foundation upon which the individual officer, serving as architect and engineer, may build his own career. Thus, continuous

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self-improvement will be a conspicuous characteristic of an ideal officer.

But important tasks can rarely be accomplished by a person acting alone. Our military paragon, regardless of his personal talents, must reinforce himself with an able staff and subordinate commanders. To accept less than the best would, in his judgment, be a neglect of duty and an injustice to his command, since the entire command would share in the disaster that mediocrity in key positions always invites. For the same reason, he would deem it unpardonable to fail to remove incompetence in any form that reveals itself within the range of his authority.

With the attainment of personal fitness and the support of able assistants, a leader has a final responsibility in the full exploitation of his resources—he must get the most out of the units and men under his command. He must do so both as a matter of moral obligation and professional necessity if his command is to be prepared for the stern test of war.

For this purpose, he must be a demanding disciplinarian, bent on instilling in his troops those habits which, learned in training, will assure a reliable performance of duty on the battlefield, despite the confusion and fear natural to all men in an environment of tension and danger. Though often obliged to appear an unfeeling martinet in training, our officer gives unflagging attention to the well-being of his men—their health, bodily comforts, and peace of mind. To the extent possible, he shares their joys, sorrows, hardships, and dangers—everything except the doubts and misgivings that at some time afflict every commander in war. These he keeps to himself.

There is a final quality that a truly superior officer should have or try to attain if he would ever imprint his name on the roll of remembered warriors. This quality I call the X-factor, the ability of a leader to inspire men in war to the point that they forget discomforts, fatigue, and fear, and at his bidding perform feats that surprise themselves and render future historians incredulous. In the homely language of Harry

Truman, such a leader is “a man who has the ability to get other people to do what they don’t want to do and like it.” Thus, the final obligation of our model officer will be to acquire and in due time demonstrate possession of the X-factor—elusive, indefinable, and probably unteachable though it may be. Considering the character we have postulated for him, I would concede him a good chance to succeed.

With so much as prologue, it is now possible to sum up the virtues and distinguishing traits with which our model officer has been imbued. Without priority in importance, I can identify the following: justice, patriotism, reliability, integrity, sense of duty, self-discipline, human understanding, loyalty, strength of will, and inspirational power.

Bear in mind that, though he is as nearly perfect a professional officer as one can imagine, he is not a perfect man in an ethical, religious, or cultural sense. He has shown no evidence thus far of possessing many virtues often associated with some of the most venerated personages of history: piety, religious faith, charity, benevolence, humility, meekness, righteousness, forgiveness, and resignation. He may, in fact, possess many of these virtues, but the exigencies of military life rarely create conditions calling for their display. Yet, while war is a dirty business conducted in an ugly environment of violence and destruction, it has often provided the occasion for acts of courage, loyalty, abnegation, and self-sacrifice showing mankind at its most noble.

Now that we have put together this construct of a model officer, how can he serve in resolving the moral problems of the officer corps? As an experiment, let us examine how such an officer might deal with some of the questions which we have found so troubling among officers.

Our model would surely do his best to restore the tarnished reputation of the officer corps for truthfulness and integrity—both by setting a right example and by seeking to eliminate officers who fail to meet the standard. With his commitment to mission

success, he could do no less, since he knows how disastrous to success in any enterprise is the presence of unreliable officers. I suspect that he would share the view that Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War in World War I, expressed in the course of defending the West Point honor system before Congress: "The inexact or untruthful soldier trifles with the lives of his fellow men and with the honor of his government, and it is therefore no matter of pride but of stern disciplinarian necessity that makes West Point require of her students a character for trustworthiness that knows no evasion."

He would react similarly with regard to senior officers who are resentful of juniors bearing ill tidings or purveying unwelcome advice. Such senior officers damage themselves and their mission by depriving themselves of factual information and independent viewpoints to the detriment of their plans and decisions. In time they will surely come a cropper before, one hopes, they can involve too many and too much in their downfall.

An ambitious officer trapped in an assignment under such a senior can only do his duty and wait for time to free him. It is still true, as I used to tell officers joining the Joint Staff, that an able staff officer capable of logical and innovative thought carries a general's star in his briefcase in much the same way that outstanding soldiers of Napoleon were said to carry a marshal's baton in their knapsacks. In the long run, no staff officer need worry about his future who passes constructive ideas to his superior and helps him avoid trouble and error.

Then we have the case of the officer who finds himself in strong personal opposition to a decision or policy of higher authority—in opposition to the all-volunteer recruitment program of the Department of Defense, for example. Before undertaking to set his superiors straight, I hope he would wait until he can answer the following questions with confidence:

- Am I sure that I know all the necessary and relevant facts?
- Am I sure that my superiors are not doing everything possible to correct the situation?

Only if both answers are affirmative should he consider action, in which case he would have two alternatives. He could resign or retire and then take his case to the public. Or, he could remain at his post and submit his argument for a change of policy through official channels. Both alternatives entail sacrifice or risk, but our model is prepared to accept them in a good cause.

What he would *not* do would be to leak his views to the press, call a press conference, or write his congressman—all reprehensible actions as he views his obligation of loyalty to his superiors.

As for fear of involvement in an unjust or aggressive war, I do not feel that our man would be greatly concerned. He knows full well that there is no authoritative definition of either kind of war. Depending on the source consulted, a just war may be one waged for a just cause that can be achieved in no other way; one capable of producing a better peace than the one existing before the war; one waged in self-defense or for legal rights; one to protect a nation's natural right; one with a high probability of producing more good consequences than bad for the human race; or one conducted non-aggressively in accordance with the international laws of war and the terms of the United Nations Charter. Obviously, most of these definitions are of little practical value to our officer, merely stimulating new semantic debates over the meaning of such phrases as "just cause," "self-defense," "natural rights," "aggressive war," and "good consequences."

In the absence of authoritative means to identify an unjust war in time to avoid participation, an officer has little choice but to assume the rightness of a governmental decision involving the country in war. Having made this assumption, he is honor-bound to carry out all legal orders and do his best to bring the war to a prompt and successful conclusion. If his side wins, he knows that there will be few charges of injustice save from the vanquished; if he loses, the victors, following the precedent of Nuremberg, are quite likely to charge him with crime and aggression regardless of evidence to the contrary. For these reasons, our model

officer views this contingency as a professional hazard which, along with other dangers of the military service, he took into account, or should have, when he took his oath as an officer.

Lastly, there is the dilemma which may arise if an officer receives a lawful order to undertake an impossible or prohibitively costly mission, or one likely to produce dire consequences apparently ignored by his superiors. Our model, recognizing that obedience to orders is one of the highest military virtues, one without which armies are worse than useless, will be instinctively inclined to obey any legal order. He would consider making an exception only in the rare circumstance when all the following conditions are met:

- He is sure that he understands the purpose of the order and the results desired by the issuing authority.

- He is equally sure that this authority does not understand the local situation and the disastrous consequences that would ensue from compliance.

- There is no time to appeal the order or a prior appeal has been rejected.

- He is disobeying on sound military grounds, not in compliance with the voice of a disapproving conscience, and is fully prepared to accept the legal and professional consequences.

As for his attitude toward the voice of conscience as a guide to military behavior, he has serious doubts as to its reliability. He is aware that wise men over the ages have disagreed as to the source, nature, and authority of conscience. Is it, as some think, the voice of God or at least a God-given moral sense with which we are endowed to serve as a source of higher guidance? There are skeptics who maintain that it is little more than the voice of conventional morality, of ingrained habit resisting a departure from past practice, or of self-interest in a pious guise. Then there are the cynical words of H. L. Mencken: "Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that somebody may be looking."

Despite his doubts about the universal validity of the deliverances of conscience, our

model officer recognizes that there is in himself an instinctive resistance to actions inconsistent with the principles of behavior he learned to follow early in his career. Perhaps this is the voice of his professional conscience; if so, he is happy to have one to keep him straight and will give it due heed. However, he is most unsympathetic with officers who use conscience as an excuse for dereliction of duty or the avoidance of dangerous or unpleasant tasks. In his view, such conduct is worthy of the disdain accorded the soldier who does not discover until the eve of battle that he is a conscientious objector.

This essay being of necessity in the nature of a monologue, I cannot judge the degree of reader acceptance of the views thus far advanced. I would expect some disagreement about the basic premise that the worth of an officer is properly measured by mission success and resource economy. This standard may appear too narrowly professional or too inflexible for equitable application to all officers.

It is quite true that, in this inquiry, our attention is focused exclusively on the ethical needs of the career officer corps. It seeks to delineate not the perfect man for all seasons, but the ideal professional officer prepared for a war environment. We cannot assume that culturally he is a Renaissance type; nor can we assume that his private life is above reproach. He may be loyal to his superiors and his profession but disloyal to his wife. He may be devoted to his troops but speak to them in the profane language of a Patton. He may keep physically fit but have General Grant's weakness for strong drink. He may work hard for victory but never go to church to pray for it. However, if he has compensating professional virtues, he may still be an exemplary military leader, although that fact in itself will not qualify him for high position in government, politics, the performing arts, or the celestial hierarchy.

The standard is indeed inflexible in that it makes no allowance for inequality of advantage among officers resulting from

race, sex, education, or family background. In the military, the payoff for all is necessarily based upon performance of duty, with rewards adjusted upward in proportion to the difficulty of the task. Given the importance of the factor of luck in many cases, injustices may arise in the distribution of the prizes, but all life is unfair to some degree, particularly life on the battlefield, where the bullets, like rain, fall on the just and the unjust. However, the high national stake involved in the success of our arms justifies the rigid standard we have adopted.

Another area of possible disagreement is the choice of the virtues ascribed to our model officer. It may be argued that no such Galahad ever existed in the real world and that, if he did, he would be too depressingly virtuous to live with. I must admit that I feel about our model much as General Sherman did about born generals: "I have read about men born as generals, peculiarly endowed by nature, but I have never seen one." However, I have met many officers who displayed the traits and characteristics of our model in varying degrees and combinations. In that sense, each virtue on the list is real and hence attainable, although the model who embodies the entirety remains a distant ideal.

The weakest part of our procedure has been the effort to predict the behavior of our hypothetical officer when confronted with the several moral dilemmas considered. Obviously, his responses are no better than my personal opinion of how an officer should act under the circumstances. One of the merits of our do-it-yourself methodology, however, is that it can be used by individuals, groups, and conceivably by the entire profession—anyone anywhere can participate who is seriously concerned with the ethics of the military profession. Such parallel efforts

could lead to a revival of interest in a comprehensive professional code of the kind that has thus far eluded us. If such a code emerged from this procedure it would have the unique merit of being the creation of bona fide military professionals who understand the requirements of leadership in war.

In the past, we have been inclined to entrust the writing of military history, the critique of military operations, and the evaluation of the proper role of the military profession to civilian writers of varying degrees of competence. In our present study, we have found no need to invoke extra-professional help to support our conclusions and judgments. Nor have we been obliged to call on any of the great names of philosophy, ethics, or religion to justify our interpretation of right and wrong in our life's work. The voice of long experience tells us that, in our profession, that which favors mission success is right or good and that which works to the contrary is wrong or bad. We need not look elsewhere for confirmation of what, for a soldier, is a self-evident truth.

If indeed we are ever to have a professional code, the military must get on with its codification, whether by the route suggested herein or by a better one. Otherwise it will never be done or will be done badly by the unqualified. The determination of what constitutes right conduct in the officer corps is too serious a business to be left to those lacking intimate acquaintance with the nature of war.

NOTE

1. Refer, for example, to my article "A Professional Ethic for the Military?" *Army*, 28 (May 1978), 18-21; Arthur J. Dyck, "Ethical Bases of the Military Profession," *Parameters*, 10 (March 1980), 39-46; or Richard A. Gabriel, "To Serve With Honor," *Army*, 30 (May 1980), 17-21.

