

How Our Training Fails Us When It Counts

By Kevin Bell

My right hand twitched with barely concealed rage as I searched the man's eyes for a clue. He was probably guilty, and if I took him inside the house and pulled out my blade, maybe he would lead me to the rest of

his fighters. I believed that he was concealing his involvement in a bloody ambush on my platoon, but the legal options for proving my suspicions were running out. On that Afghan mountainside I had no use for arguments about law. Then suddenly I had a new decision to make....

No infantryman who sits through the required PowerPoint classes on the Geneva Conventions and treatment of enemy prisoners of war (EPW) leaves the classroom with a new perspective on the ethics of war. These presentations are designed to teach soldiers the legal boundaries of their combat missions, not to

A soldier moves an insurgent at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., where role-players from the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment test the skills of soldiers from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, based at Fort Carson, Colo.



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convince skeptics that torture is always unacceptable. To do that the U.S. Army would need to train soldiers to think through the ethically confusing situations that seem to justify the use of brutal interrogation. As it stands, though, classroom and field training on detainee operations do almost nothing to help soldiers untangle the twisted moral landscape of anger, intelligence gathering and justice in wartime.

At first it is difficult to understand why something might need to change at a time when incidents of torture and prisoner abuse are relatively rare. The discussion alone can offend soldiers who have never personally tortured a prisoner if an instructor appears to be accusing them of moral backwardness. The problem is not that our junior leaders are closet torturers. Their job requires a sober commitment to ethics and law, which they are prepared to exceed. Unfortunately the Army sends them off to war without ever

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convincing them why they should take the right course of action when rage and thirst for revenge poison their ability to lead other soldiers and make clear decisions in combat. Even if actual incidents are uncommon, there's no reason to think that near misses aren't occurring every day.

Our country's leadership wants soldiers to embrace the guidelines of tactical questioning and detainee operations to the point that they will make an ethical decision even when there appear to be personal or tactical arguments in favor of torturing a captive for information. This is an understandable goal. It makes the unrealistic assumption, however, that rules by themselves are enough to shape behavior in the worst scenarios. This idea doesn't always sell well in the organizational culture of small infantry and cavalry units. In our own recon troop, a rigid adherence to law and doctrine was associated with combat inexperience and weak leadership skills. Appeals to law are not always effective when thousands of infantrymen and cavalrymen are learning that personal experience trumps formal training.

In the end, we are soldiers, and soldiers die every day. It may be tragic and horrible, but we learn to march on. When members of a platoon believe they have captured someone involved in the death of one of their own, however, they may need something more than a recollection of slide shows and memories of EPW search drills to keep them from committing a war crime that inflicts a major

strategic defeat on the war effort. I learned the hard way that this isn't nearly as far-fetched as it sounds. The first step in addressing this structural weakness is realizing that the stories that end in tragedy and infamy have beginnings that look uncomfortably familiar.

Flashback: 2008

I was a platoon leader in a respected recon unit, and the prospect of real combat in the mountains of southeastern Afghanistan was just over the horizon. It wasn't real to me yet. All I could feel were the nerves and excitement that came with being the new guy.

On the ride home after a particularly long mission, we drove into a near ambush that killed my gunner and left me bloody and shaken. Going on with life was the hardest thing I ever did, but the mission demanded it. In the weeks that followed I went to council meetings, discussed erosion with farmers and tactically questioned my way onto hidden mountain paths in search of the murderous thugs who were responsible for my soldier's death. My life was ambushes, cups of chai at shuras, and agriculture. Combat was nothing like what we had been taught to expect in the schoolhouse at Fort Benning, Ga.

We spent far more time acting as government liaisons, detectives and development officials than kicking in doors. By the end of the summer I didn't even bat an eye when my commander said, "Hey LT, you're building a new combat outpost up the road from here. Get out there with your platoon and pick a nice spot to begin construction." I knew nothing about bulldozers or base construction, but I learned. We do what we have to do, or at least that's how I explained it to myself.

One sunny day the monotony of construction was interrupted by a bomb-search mission with a local informant. On a hunch, I asked him if he knew who was responsible for the ambush in the spring that had killed my gunner. He did. I started to shake with rage as he told me the suspect's name. I had met the man only a week before. I felt like a fool as I remembered that he lived in the same village where our murder investigation had led us in the hours before the ambush.

I longed to ride back up the valley and have my soldiers pack his broken body into a truck after I forced him to tell me the location and names of his fighters. Once I told my squads and the Afghan soldiers who I thought he might be, only Almighty God would be able to save him. But could I trust the informant at his word?

I knew that one accusation wasn't enough to legally justify the raid I imagined, but I was tempted to force a confession from him to build my case. With a muttered curse, I pulled myself out of these violent fantasies and continued the bomb search. I waited until my temper had cooled to discuss the new intelligence with my platoon sergeant and commander. We agreed on a simple plan to bring humanitarian aid to the village and sit down with the suspect and other local leaders. We could use this as an opportunity to

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meet with the unsuspecting target, search for leads and confirm or deny the details of the accusation.

I was long used to the mechanics of these sorts of operations, and the planning and preparation went smoothly. As I settled into my seat on mission day, the radio checks, engine noise and observations from the lead truck occupied my mind. Even so, this soon faded into the background as our route passed the site of the ambush and I relived the events in reverse.

This was where we stopped to call our squadron after the elements were in contact. This was where my .50-caliber machine gun tumbled off of the hood into the streambed. This was where my gunner was struck in the chest by the rocket-propelled grenades. This was the site of explosions, blood, screams, burnt flesh and an awful smell. Now I could see the flat rocks on the hillside to the south where they had hidden their ammunition. They couldn't have been more than 75 meters away: no wonder my door had so many bullet scars in it.

Everything happened so quickly once we arrived at the village that there was no time to stop and consider where I really wanted the mission to end. In the blink of an eye, security was set up, the Afghan soldiers were distributing the aid, and I was sitting outside my target's home waiting for water to boil and asking uncomfortable questions about his personal business. As his agitation became clearer, I felt the bile of hatred rising again inside of me. I slowly realized what I had wanted to do all along.

I was tired of playing by the rules. He was in my grasp and with him the facts about the local attacks. Suddenly, the mission had nothing to do with doctrine or reconnaissance. My interpreter and I could find a way into the home with the suspect, and he could either tell me everything about the networks in the area or he could bleed. It was up to him. When done with him, I would say that he attacked me and I had to respond with force. I needed the truth about what happened more than I needed to follow a bunch of rules written for a different kind of war by people who had never been in my position. The bold words that I had long ago spoken to my soldiers about the importance of morality in combat were forgotten.

As I wrestled with my wrath, I had to smile at the man and keep a straight face. Somewhere in my heart I knew that the original reconnaissance plan was the right one, but I couldn't find a way to overcome my fury. Just as I turned to my interpreter to suggest that we dip inside the home for a private chat with our host, my hatred caught in my throat like a bone. In that pause, I scrambled for the right reason to make a decision. Torture. Don't torture. Where there should have been an answer there was only darkness. It would be wrong to say that I made a choice, but I finally broke the silence to ask an unrelated question. Soon the water boiled. The tea came. We took an awkward photograph for the record, walked back to our vehicles and left.

As it turned out, in spite of meeting all of the mission's

original information priorities, we were never able to confirm or deny the suspect's involvement in the local ambushes. Part of me was glad that I hadn't tortured him, but my conscience still haunted me. Wasn't it worth finding out the truth? What was wrong with me that I was so worried about following the law when my enemies had never considered it, torturing, threatening and murdering the local school teachers and truck drivers at whim? Who would speak of law and order for them? What about my dead soldier? I bore the weight of these questions alone as I didn't want to burden my men. I wasn't proud of it, but in the

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moment of truth all of the briefings on legal procedures and proper intelligence-gathering techniques meant almost nothing to me.

But for the Grace of God...

To be perfectly honest, I still don't understand why I didn't cut my target into ribbons in the hope of learning what I wanted to know. Nothing in my religious, secular or military education had prepared me for what I faced. At least in an ambush things were deadly clear: Get out of the kill zone, shoot the enemy. When faced with a different kind of worst-case scenario, I had no such clarity. If the target had invited me into his house I probably would have buckled to temptation. As it turned out, the outcome of the situation was determined by luck.

At first I tried to comfort myself with the idea that there was something unusual and unique about my experience, but I knew better. Earlier that year I learned that a lieutenant whom I knew had been killed by a bomb. Before long, his company commander believed that he found one of the people involved in the attack. Unfortunately, due to circumstances that I'm not in a position to understand, he made the decision to step outside of the boundaries of law in order to get enough information to arrest the suspect. Word got out, and his career went up in smoke along with the immediate goal of finding the men who killed my friend.

I wasn't there with my dead friend's company commander and can't make a precise comparison between our experiences. The general outline of his story, however, fits a pattern that I remember well. No one knows how many leaders are facing the same difficult choices tonight, but the paths that end in such an infamous decision are little different from the paths traveled by other leaders. This

should haunt all of us. By pretending that the distance between torturer and good leader is impossibly far, we are failing each other. A leader shouldn't have to think through such a nightmarish scenario for the first time while staring into a suspect's eyes on a secured objective. Soldiers must be held accountable for their own failures, but what about the organizational structures that facilitate such mistakes in the first place?

When Doctrine Fails Us

Current training practices are at the root of the unrealistic way that many soldiers think of enemy prisoners of war. First of all, in training it is difficult to reproduce the emotional trauma of the injury or death of a comrade. We usually train with scenarios in which we have no real connection to the targets that we capture, and so our interactions with detainees are far more robotic than they could ever be in combat. Most of the time we shoot our blanks, reach the limit of advance, search the "dead" EPWs and try to leave the objective before someone throws a few artillery simulators. This isn't nearly good enough. The role of ethics in training and Army institutions has to change significantly if we want soldiers to remember the importance of morality in combat, but the lack of realism in detainee training is

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only the most obvious problem. The issues created by our infantry culture are much better hidden.

Small infantry and cavalry units have an understandable aversion to certain tactical and structural doctrines. Many of these stem from contradictions between the theoretical role of a unit and the missions that they actually conduct in combat. This is especially true for any sort of special-mission unit. The Army's scout platoons and reconnaissance troops have had a confusing decade as they are required to train on reconnaissance techniques that they are rarely authorized to use in today's combat zones. My own platoon never used our training in hide-sites or high-frequency radios in Afghanistan, nor did we train on base construction before arrival.

These difficulties may be unavoidable as the Army tries to balance its preparation for conventional warfare with the need to fight the current counterinsurgency campaign. Of course, skepticism towards doctrine has an origin in common sense at the small-unit level. Soldiers intuitively understand that doctrine needs to be adjusted to fit mission needs,

but the same cannot be said of legal and moral prohibitions. To have meaning, these should be essentially unbreakable. Unfortunately, because of the lack of quality training on the realistic scenarios that challenge both moral and tactical judgment, it's easy for this otherwise healthy skepticism of doctrine to creep into areas where it doesn't belong.

Infantrymen know that they aren't allowed to conduct full-blown interrogations, much less torture, but this knowledge often sits in uncomfortable tension with the day-to-day reality of death and the focus on combat experience as the best source of insight on the current mission. As a profession we have to adjust our training so that we know what to do when rage tells us that it's OK to go beyond the limits of tactical questioning with a captive. We can't stop there, though. We need to talk to our peers and subordinates about the real challenges of ethical leadership in a way that acknowledges how our job culture can warp our understanding of morality.

Recommendations

It is a dangerous fiction that torture and prisoner abuse are issues only for trained interrogators. Our first instinct is to tackle this problem with improved ethical training, but that instinct needs to be combined with an approach that addresses the friction between big-Army rules and infantry culture. Television often provides great examples of flawed thinking that we can use as training tools. The wildly unrealistic torture stories presented by shows like "24" can be contrasted with actual combat scenarios as a starting point for discussions on the difference between fantasy-world, ticking-time-bomb ethics and military ethics. To be effective, though, ethical scenario training has to expand outside of the classroom.

We need to teach soldiers to deal with these morally challenging scenarios without stealing precious time from unit training calendars. One way to do this is with a more realistic approach to "actions on the objective" in field exercises. Realism in detainee training helps soldiers to focus on the aftermath of a raid or ambush in addition to preparing for the planning and execution of their mission. The same change in focus can also demonstrate critical weaknesses in our knowledge of skill sets that we might otherwise discover only overseas.

As an infantry platoon leader, I conducted tactical questioning every day without ever understanding why doctrine drew such a sharp line between my techniques and actual interrogation. So when anger weakened my desire to stick to the original plan, my fantasies expanded to include all sorts of assumptions about interrogation, torture and the future outcome of my actions.

Soldiers don't always need to know the "why" of particular rules and doctrines. The difference between tactical questioning and interrogation is an exception for a simple reason. We need to equip ourselves with all of the possible

tools to ensure that our integrity holds up even when opportunity, thirst for revenge or pure aggression tells us that torture is OK. Everyone should know why we allow only trained interrogators to interrogate and why the techniques of tactical questioning are best suited for the sorts

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of immediate site exploitation missions that infantrymen need to find the enemy in the next house.

It's not that we need more pages of ethical doctrine. Instead, it needs to be better, more clearly related to missions and less kitschy. Current efforts by the big Army to solve these problems are significant, but they are often either invisible in the lower ranks or done in a way that no one takes seriously. The seven Army Values are a perfect example. They are emphasized at basic training and show up on NCO evaluation reports, but what do they really mean to us? The fact that they conveniently spell out the acronym "LDRSHIP" could be used by the Army as part of a campaign to connect ethics with leadership, but it is instead treated like an empty motto that has little or no impact on training or operations.

The Army obviously realizes that ethics are important, but small units need more concrete support from higher echelons to help them operationalize the lofty moral standards enshrined in our law and treaty obligations. Too often the institutional answer to the problem of integrating ethics into unit life has been to leave it all to the chaplains. There is an important role for chaplains to play in these discussions, and units in combat need good chaplains just as much as they need bullets. With that said, there is a mismatch between the huge role that the Army envisions for chaplains, and what they are actually able to do in many units.

The first step to improving this begins with a renewed focus on operational knowledge during the training of chaplains, but this must also be matched by dramatically improved training for commanders and operations officers on how to integrate ethics into mission execution. The role of ethical expert may fall to chaplains by default, but the institutional Army must send the message that ethical proficiency is every soldier's business.

Irrespective of how our training and institutions evolve, the conversations that we aren't having about this topic are

the most important missing element. We need to talk more openly about how our job changes the way we see moral problems that might seem simple in other circumstances. There is a place for anger when it drives us to fight harder and be better soldiers. The line isn't always clear, though. On an average day, our skepticism towards hard adherence to doctrine keeps us from doing something foolish that could get our soldiers killed. On a bad day, that same skepticism can combine with rage or confusion to tell us that breaking a law is no different from changing our tactics to meet mission needs. These challenges have to be recognized as both a normal aspect of the profession of arms and critical points of potential failure when things go wrong downrange.

Bridging the Gap

The purpose of this article is not to convince soldiers that torture is wrong. Instead I have tried to show how little our unconsidered opinions about torture help us to make difficult decisions when the circumstances stack up in favor of the wrong choice. I believe that any of the religious, legal or practical arguments are strong enough to support the current ban on torture on their own, but this never mattered to me in the moment. Understanding these various debates is an important part of the solution, but only a minor part.

Reasonable people can disagree about the best arguments for and against torture. For us as soldiers, though, these claims are beside the point. We are required by duty and honor to uphold our country's statutory and treaty obligations, which state that torture is categorically unacceptable. To better fulfill this duty we have to do more to confront the ethical dilemmas of our profession before we go to war. It isn't enough to know the rules if we are still unsure in a time of weakness what to do with detainees who might have tactically useful information. Our training and leadership culture have to reinforce our understanding that the ethical treatment of prisoners doesn't undermine the counterinsurgency strategy.

We need to step up to the unique challenges of ethical leadership in our profession by squaring our doctrinal

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practices and field craft with our training and organizational culture. It should not be Army practice to improve ethics training with PowerPoint presentations any more than it should be common for units to treat soldiers and detainees in training like programmed robots. We need to begin shaping a different future with a community conversation about ethics, anger and how best to prepare ourselves for war. The next generation of junior leaders will thank us.

