

What Goes on in Theater Stays in Theater?

By Lt. Col. Joseph Doty and Maj. Shawn Tenace

There is an unfortunate, underground and mostly unspoken saying among some members of the military concerning temporary duty (TDY): "What happens on TDY stays on TDY." This certainly is not the norm in our military, and this expression is often said in jest; unfortunately, however, there is some truth in it. The connotation of this saying is, quite plainly, that "everything and anything goes," except for talking or revealing anything about any indiscretions upon returning home (or to the duty station). The general idea is that soldiers can live second lives on TDY and return home without any repercussions. This is simply unacceptable, and it runs counter to our professional military ethic. The most widely publicized incident of this type of behavior was the U.S. Navy's Tailhook incident in 1991.

Segments of our military are suffering from a version of this same men-

tality in our current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and we could see the negative effects 15 years from now as our young officers, noncommissioned officers and soldiers gain rank and more influential leadership positions in the military. For example, if the truth had not been made public, the scandal at Abu Ghraib prison and the deaths at Haditha might have fallen into a "black hole."

Moral and ethical indiscretions by deployed soldiers are not new and, for obvious reasons, are not often discussed. Leaders at all levels, however, should facilitate dialogue on these "unspoken" topics. The type of situational ethics that occur during deployment can be described as *bracketed morality*—certain types of values and ethics that only apply in certain situations (for example, "all is fair in love and war").

There is little argument that our current military force is more experienced,

combat hardened, mentally agile, flexible, stronger, and technologically and tactically superior to any potential adversary. Our leaders are becoming more confident and agile, but those gains cannot come at the cost of being humble, disciplined and grounded in the basics. It is our argument that the current operational tempo of deployment has had the unintended consequence of skipping a fundamental developmental step, the building of basic military discipline. This is an enormous challenge to our junior leaders. This problem is now being compounded by earlier and higher promotion rates—for NCOs and officers. Are our soldiers losing basic discipline in multiple deployments in theater?

A current brigade commander in Iraq recently summarized this problem: "Our culture is threatened by the wear of this place," he says. "We must be careful. We have only a short time to

define the problem and determine a course of action, then it's 'game on,' in my opinion. The discipline that binds us used to be woven throughout everything we [did] and every step we [took] ... now it's just isolated to those [actions] that keep our buddies alive and out of trouble. This won't work in a noncombat environment. We have a whole new generation of troopers and junior leaders who don't know or understand the preglobal war on terrorism protocol or discipline that got us here."

This basic discipline is absolutely necessary and is the foundation for military units to be ethically sound and effective. It comes through time and multiple repetitions in compliance with high standards and repercussions for failure. Missing or overlooking these teachable moments simply because we are deployed can cost us in combat and counterinsurgency (COIN), in the struggle for positive media support and possibly in the future success of our military.

One example is the time a deployed senior staff sergeant stated: "I just want to kill someone, sir." If the leader does not immediately correct an undisciplined statement like this, then the discipline of the unit and its standards are jeopardized. Another example is allowing (or turning a blind eye to) soldiers being heavy handed with noncombatants and the civilian population. Without correcting these behaviors we have given our consent, and our discipline and control are lost. We write about the people as the center of gravity in COIN operations but often have not displayed the discipline to treat them appropriately. Soldiers will often become confused about acceptable and unacceptable patterns of conduct. Add the realities of combat, improvised explosive devices, direct fire, blood on soldiers' hands or a soldier's best friend's death, and the basic foundation of discipline to hold a position, assess the situation, rely on sound tactics and react appropriately becomes a matter of life or death.

Discipline can be defined as a consistent and predictable behavioral outcome as a result of education and repetitive training. Discipline is ex-

pected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, as a direct result of cognitive and moral development. Primary components are instinctive and controlled behavior as a result of disciplined and thoughtful education, training and self-control. Three common indicators of military discipline are unit performance, unit appearance and unit conduct.

Basic military discipline is an essential developmental process for junior leaders of all ranks. Discipline caught, taught or learned in initial entry training, the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, officer candidate school and the military academies is more of an enculturation into the military than the actual building blocks of discipline. It is difficult to assess initial entry unit or soldier discipline when every action and activity is planned, supervised and directed. Developing the type of discipline required to function in a complex COIN environment takes time and repetition. From a traditional paradigm, discipline can be built at the soldier and unit levels by some very mundane and monotonous tasks, the importance of which young soldiers might not understand. Conducting drill and ceremony training with an emphasis on individual attention to detail may seem outdated, but it will help to build discipline. Conducting two hours of drill and ceremonies, unit runs, in-rank inspections or parades is a developmental process that can take more than five years to understand and appreciate. New soldiers do understand, however—it is made very clear to them—that marching sharply is their duty to themselves and their unit. They understand that they are expected to perform crew drills over and over again until they achieve perfection because their platoon depends on them. They understand basic customs and courtesies in addressing senior NCOs and officers.

Conversely, there are other and less dogmatic ways to build this same discipline. Col. Casey Haskins, director of the Department of Military Instruction at the U.S. Military Academy, argues that the discipline necessary to build adaptive and flexible soldiers

for this new era of persistent conflict requires innovative training methods that emphasize and reward initiative and nondoctrinal solutions. For example, tactical decision training where there are no "right answers" (standardized training by outcomes rather than by the process used to achieve them) is one way to develop this discipline and to teach soldiers how to understand and solve problems.

How this basic discipline is instilled is debatable; what is not debatable is its necessity. Indicators of discipline in a unit include a soldier's appearance and conduct. In addition, how well does the unit maintain and account for its equipment? How much attention to detail is emphasized on weapons systems crew drill training? How well does the unit comply with military customs and courtesies? How often does policing of the ranks (on-the-spot correction) occur in the unit when there are lapses in discipline?

At no other time in history have our discipline and ethical standards been put to the test as they are today in Iraq and Afghanistan. Discipline is even more important now because of the complexity and fog of the COIN war.

Is this issue a major problem or crisis for our military? It is difficult to assess. At the very least, however, we need open and frank dialogue on the subject. Leaders in our units, schools, training areas and day rooms should initiate nonattribution discussions that focus on where we are with this discipline and where we need to be. As professionals, we are responsible for self-correction and for providing honest critiques of ourselves. Criticizing the "what goes on in theater stays in theater" mentality would be a good start. □

LT. COL. JOSEPH DOTY is the deputy director of the Army's Center of Excellence for the Professional Military Ethic. MAJ. SHAWN TENACE teaches in the Department of Physical Education at the U.S. Military Academy.

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