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Improper Relationships - An Ethical Dilemma

MSG Sa'eed A. Mustafa

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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Mr. Mike Artis

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the challenges which leaders at all levels face in today's army with maintaining order and discipline as it pertains to the improper relationships within the ranks. The Army's policy is that NCO's will not socialize with lower enlisted and that officers will not socialize with enlisted. The fact that Soldiers are human and their feelings are complex makes this a challenge to for leaders at all levels to enforce.

Army Regulation

According to article 134, of the Manual for Courts Martial, Fraternization is punishable under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. In fact the military is much stricter in this regard than is any civilian organization. If convicted of this offense in a trial by courts martial one could receive the following maximum punishment: Dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances, and confinement for 1 year. The mere fact that soldiers appear to have a relationship other than professional is not grounds for a court martial. (manual for courts-martial 1995)

Generally, most leaders do not have a problem enforcing army regulations, and punishing those who have violated the law is not a problem. My philosophy for most of my time as an NCO has been don't look for ways to slam people, however if the evidence of wrong doing get's to my desk then recommend to the commander that the Soldier be punished. During my first tour as a First Sergeant I would always recommend that a Soldier who appeared before the commander for an article 15 be maxed out. Fortunately for me, I got to be a First Sergeant in 4 more organizations over a six year period. I would come to learn that every situation was different and some had mitigating and extenuating circumstances which needed to be considered. I watched very closely while some very good officers were adjudicating article 15's. I noticed that Battalion Commanders in particular would take a considerable amount of time pondering over the evidence to ensure that they made the right decisions.

The issue of fraternization is something that some leaders do not like to address because they will be seen as being extreme. Often fraternization does not seem important as some other performance based standards. During the majority of my time in the army emphasis has been placed on making sure Soldiers are fit to fight and primarily this meant to have high physical

fitness scores, high weapons qualification, and eliminate drug use. During this time of transformation, and turbulence in the Army, policies are being adjusted, which are difficult for some soldiers to accept. There was a time when Soldiers who were overweight were separated from the military, no matter how good of a worker, or how well they performed on the physical fitness test they were chaptered out of the Army. The war on terror and difficulty in recruiting has motivated senior leaders to make these policy adjustments. No longer are soldiers chaptered out for being overweight, and failing two consecutive physical fitness test. In 2003, when I became an Advanced Individual Training First Sergeant, any Soldier who came up positive on a urinalysis was separated. When I left that assignment in 2006, Soldiers who where positive multiple times where still being retained and sent to there first duty station against the recommendations of the unit leadership. This example and others are factors which make some leaders think that issues such as fraternization are not worth dealing with.

Time Deployed

Soldiers are now serving on deployments for one year into a hostile theater of operations, and in some cases longer. National Guard and Reserve Soldiers are being mobilized for 18 months to 2 years and many are leaving there families behind for most of that time. The longer deployments are happening for the same Soldiers more frequently, to the point that in there years some Soldiers have spent over two years away from there family. This optempo is most certainly having and adverse effect on the military family. In light of these conditions created by military service, Soldiers are finding themselves looking to there battle buddies and others who are deployed with them for emotional comfort and companionship.

Perception is Reality

Individuals in the U.S. Army come from many different cultures, religious backgrounds, and ethnic groups, with different values about family life. In light of this fact, some will view friendships and work relationships different than others. The challenge for leaders is to instill army values into the Soldiers from the time they enter the military and continue to develop them throughout the time that they serve. This is not an easy task as it pertains to each individual's values and their personal beliefs.

I had a personal experience as a Platoon Sergeant that makes the point of how the perception of an improper relationship can become an ethical dilemma. A few of my Soldiers, one of which was a single young female, was sent on a mission as part of a task force for about two months. Upon their return, I was told by one of the male Soldiers that a married male NCO had been seen in a secluded area with my female Soldier, and that he was convinced that they were having sex because of the sounds they were making that could be heard by others. Being aware of the Army policy and thinking that it was the right thing to do, I informed my First Sergeant and Company Commander. My Company Commander stated to me that I was not the moral police, and that he was not compelled to do anything to this otherwise good NCO.

Another incident happened while I was a First Sergeant stationed in Korea. One weekend, I was out walking and I spotted a female Sergeant in my unit, who had served with me previously at Fort Carson. This Sergeant was walking while holding hands with a male, although I did not know the male she was walking with. I knew it was not her husband because I had met her husband at an FRG meeting at Fort Carson. I was aware that while at Carson this female Soldier had experienced marital problems, and was discussing divorce because her husband was abusive. This NCO was one of the hardest workers in her Platoon and could drive almost every vehicle in

the motor pool, and now here she is walking hand and hand with someone other than her husband; my perception was that she was involved sexually with the man she was walking with, although I had no proof that she was in fact doing so. This was an Ethical dilemma for me because I did not want to see her career ruined. However, I also wanted to maintain good order and discipline in my unit. Once in that same unit I witness a male NCO hanging out with a male PFC who was in his squad in the Ville drinking beer, and a few days later I saw these same individuals together again.

Conclusion

These types of situations in the military are not uncommon especially in light of the frequent deployments and geographical separations of Soldiers from their families. In some cases, Soldiers are spending more time with their units than they are with their own families. This creates a situation where the lines will sometime get blurred between friends and leaders. I once believed that it was very easy to make the decision to hold people accountable for this type of behavior, however with many complex circumstances as part of the equation; to include my belief that Soldiers are placed in abnormal and often unbearable emotional situations. It is definitely understood why the regulation governing fraternization is necessary. If fraternization goes unchecked it is possible that leaders will make decisions of who gets missions, or goes into harms way based on their friendships or improper relationships. This paper does attempt to argue that we as leaders should turn a blind eye to violations of the regulation and military law just because of the current contemporary operating environment. My intent is to highlight that it is definitely an ethical dilemma for many leaders within the Army to confront the perception of improper relationships.

References

Manual for Courts-Martial, United States, 1995.