

Ethics and the modern battlefield

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Soldiers violating the law of war has both occurred and been recorded extensively over history. Our ethical conduct on the battlefield must be above board we, as an Army cannot afford anything less. We are accountable for our actions good, bad, or indifferent in both the national and international spotlight Human rights advocates, our enemies, and other governments, look closely at how we conduct our business as an army in dealing with the enemy. The Geneva Convention and Hague treaties outline international law on ethical conduct on the battlefield and treatment of prisoners of war (POW). Field Manual (FM) 27-10 *The Law of Land warfare* is 337 pages long and outlines how we are to conduct ourselves as soldiers on the battlefield, this FM is based on the Geneva and Hague conventions. The law of war is a political hot potato, as many conservative commentators believe that we should ignore the Geneva and Hague conventions as obsolete.

Technology has changed the pace and face but not the basics of the modern battlefield. In today's battlefield, however we still have many of the same issues that have faced Soldiers from the time of the revolutionary war. Examples of actions where we failed to abide by the Geneva and Hague conventions are No Gun Ri (Korean War), Mi Lai (Vietnam), and Abu Ghraib (Iraq). In World War II, we have numerous cases of both allied and enemy cases of prisoner abuses. In Korea at No Gun Ri, civilians were shot during the American retreat. LT Kelly's involvement at Mi Lai in the massacre is a shameful recorded event of the Vietnam War. In the very recent case of Abu Ghraib, prisoner abuse was extremely harmful to our cause in the Iraqi war. The case of LTC West of the 4th ID as a Battalion Commander he personally violated the ROE by placing

a pistol to the head of an Iraqi that he was interrogating. The enemies we have faced have used these cases as useful publicity against us in the international arena. These cases have involved either court martial or intense national and international public scrutiny.

Conservative commentators have been on the radio, television, and internet to push their view, which is that the Geneva and Hague conventions are obsolete as the enemy, seems unwilling to abide by the rules. Americans and the rest of the world do not tend to share this viewpoint though. Americans tend to view each case as an embarrassment and public relations victory for our enemy.

The speed at which cases of possible war crimes become public is the biggest change over the past 100 years. Technology on the modern battlefield is not only the sophisticated military hardware but also cell phones, digital cameras, internet, and satellite-links. American and the world public now have an instant view of what is going on due to this new technology. Americans during World War II did not see as much as they do today because censors could easily stop pictures and sensitive information from getting to the home fronts. The option of censors and total censorship is no longer with us on today's modern battlefield. The days of news from the front taking days, weeks, and months are forever over. The new method of embedding reporters with units is providing a way of showing the American side of the story and reducing the enemy's ability to spread rumors about battlefield events. This method while showing the American side also can backfire when our Soldiers are not doing the right things. LT Kelly would have been less inclined to have committed the outrageous acts at Mi Lai had there been an embedded reporter along with his unit.

Rules of Engagement (ROE) are legal, moral, and ethical guidelines for Soldiers on the battlefield to follow. The ROE is based on FM 27-10 and normally reproduced on small easy to carry cards. ROE covers not only when and how to engage the enemy but the treatment of prisoners and non-combatants. Today's battlefield is no longer linear as in past conflicts so it is paramount that all Soldiers understand the ROE. Units currently training to deploy undergo ROE training to know when it is legal to engage the enemy. Soldiers going thru reception, staging, and onward integration (RSOI) receive not only the training but also ROE cards. No one expects Soldiers to carry a large book with them into combat so ROE cards using them to remember the points they need to keep in mind. Leaders must understand the ROE and strictly enforce it prior to going into the combat zones. ROE training must be part of all operations even convoy briefs as anyone on a convoy can be involved in engagements. Leaders must also reinforce training while in the combat zone, as their Soldiers will deal with many situations requiring an intense understanding of the ROE. Leaders not understanding or enforcing the ROE can get into trouble on the modern battlefield quickly. Embedded reporters know and understand the ROE their job is to report what they see good, bad, or indifferent. Reporters know the old saying "if it bleeds, it leads" so a leader should know if a Soldier commits a violation of the ROE it will be on CNN, FOX, and of course Al-Jazerra networks before they are back in the cantonment area. A Marine shot a wounded combatant while being filmed by an embedded reporter during the Fulluja offensive in November 2004. As it happened this Marine's Division Sergeant Major and Commander watched in stunned silence at the FOX news broadcast at their Division Headquarters in Fulluja. Soldiers following the ROE will keep themselves out of trouble. The Marine in question was quickly absolved

of wrongdoing by inspection of his actions on the film and the ROE. In the case of Abu-Garib embedded reporters were not on site but the digital pictures soon made it around the world. Soldier's prisoner abuses quickly became a big political issue, as it was obvious that many ROE violations had occurred.

Our ethical conduct on the battlefield must be above board we, as an Army cannot afford anything less. No matter what the enemy does, we are obligated to abide by the Geneva and Hague conventions. We are accountable for our actions good, bad, or indifferent in both the national and international spotlight. The incidents at No Gun Ri, Abu Ghraib, Mi Lai cannot be erased but we can work on ensuring we do not repeat those mistakes.