

“What Is Ethically Right, Quantity or Quality?”

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The Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) field has made quite a few misjudgments in how we are supporting the Global War on Terrorism and the effect it is having on our Soldiers and our career field. It has created an ethical dilemma in how we fill, and train our EOD units to deploy. When solving any ethical dilemma, we must first define the problem, collect relevant facts, and come up with courses of actions to take. We have done this, but are still not adhering to the courses of actions decided on, and must again revisit the problems. The price we are paying for our depleting ranks is high and the loss of highly trained Team Leaders atrocious. Many are more concerned with the Quantity of EOD Soldiers sent to battle, than the Quality. We owe Soldiers the Loyalty to do the right thing for them, the Respect they deserve, and our Integrity to ensure training takes place, for they have the Personnel Courage to get the job done.

The first and most sever problem is that of unit staffing prior to a future deployment. We discovered the first culprit shortly after the events of 11 September 2001. When the call went out to deploy three units to support "Operation Enduring Freedom" (OEF), the information provided in Unit Status Reports, decided which units would deploy. As we all know, this report is usually factual on Equipment and Supply readiness. However, it is subjective when it comes to Personnel and Training. It is here that our Integrity came into question.

Explosive Ordnance Disposal Companies are quite small in comparison to standard army companies, with personnel not exceeding twenty- two. The unit breaks down into two person teams that the company's fragments out to support other units, and come together when facing Unexploded Ordnance incidents beyond the capabilities of one team. These small teams are lead by a Staff Sergeant or Sergeant in a promotable status. In the personnel area, we found that even though these units had the proper number, up to thirty percent of the personnel were not able to deployable due to either medical problems or lack of family care plans.

The first course of action was to “Steal from Peter to Pay Paul” and we began a Temporary Change of Station of volunteers from other units to fill these vacancies. Even though this was a simple solution, we created an even larger problem that would exist for the next two years. The demand for more EOD units became greater by the Combatant Commanders, though we were able to shorten the deployments to six months, more units were pushed out the door. This meant that a soldier could return to home station after volunteering to go with another unit and would redeploy back to theater within a few months. Even with the Selfless Service that the Soldiers displayed by constantly volunteering, these numbers started to dwindle.

The second dilemma concerning training was not that easy to solve. We found that the level of training a unit conducted in preparation to support and carryout counterterrorist operations was also lacking.

An EOD technician goes through eleven months of schooling, and that is just enough to understand the basics, required of the job. It then takes years to train a competent Team Leader, this is due to the diversity of the missions they respond to; Conventional Ordnance, Improvised Explosive Devices, Off Post Police requests and protection support to the U. S. Secret Service. These are some of the daily duties of an EOD Team performs at home station.

When listening to our subordinates we realized that we had to better prepare our Soldiers, so we brought this forward to our superiors. The course of action decided on was all units deploying to OEF, Bosnia or Kosovo would undergo a two-week specific theater training course at Redstone Arsenal, AL. To supplement the instructors who had not deployed since the last Gulf War, each returning unit would provide Team Leaders to assist in the training and bring back new developments from theater.

The EOD community had stabilized itself and the courses of action taken had solved the immediate problems. However, we were still losing Soldiers, especially Team Leaders to enemy action. Then came "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and everything we had built was thrown out the window.

The Combatant Commanders wanted more EOD Soldiers and the first casualty was that units were to deploy without all the authorized personnel. It was in the position of Team Leaders that we were suffering the most; the response we got was to "grow your own". We did, cramming years of knowledge and experience into intensified training programs at the Company levels. We could only hope that it was enough, for when an EOD Soldier makes a mistake, it is usually fatal. The two-week training at Redstone fell by the wayside as the initial troops deployed. Of the three EOD companies to cross "Berm" on 19 March 2003, most were composed of newly promoted Team Leaders, who had not received more formal training than their units could accomplish.

During the first months, the EOD companies received a few WIAs and unfortunately one KIA. Despite the prediction, that one in three EOD Soldiers would be killed or wounded. However, they were ready and beat the odds. It was due to the Individual Personnel Courage, Training and Self Sacrifice that the number was so low.

The ability to fill deploying units to authorized levels came back up again. So that companies deploying into theater went with the proper number of personnel, a new decision came about. As Soldiers graduated from EOD School, they immediately went to deploying units, sometimes with just days before the unit went "Wheels up". Sent without any additional training or preparation, just fill out numbers required. This led too many disjointed units, who had not trained with or had a chance to incorporate the new personnel. It was during this policy

that we started to take even greater casualties, especially with the constantly changing tactics used by the enemy. The Shortage of Team Leaders forced some units had to place their Sergeant First Classes and Master Sergeants into the positions. This to try to fulfill mission requirements and even this action still came up short of what they needed.

These practices continue to today, in some small ways the courses of action been modified and are at work. The two-week mandatory training has resumed, and we are sending follow on soldiers to it, something not done before. Additional personnel arrive at least a few months before deployment, this ensure some of the troops have some time to train. There is still a great demand for Team Leaders with their ranks still depleted due to injuries, or departure from the service for high paying civilian jobs. The high OPTEMPO a unit has not helped either. An EOD Soldier can expect to deploy at least three times in a four-year period.

I believe that we are showing these soldiers the Duty, Honor and Respect they deserve, but must constantly work at it. For we have let them down in the past, at each new crisis, and still rarely have the ability to look into the future and what we are doing to them. We are working harder maintaining our own Integrity, ensuring that Soldiers receive the training needed prior to deployment. As the current Combatant Commanders have requested and increase in EOD Soldiers, it is important that we need to maintain the standards to assure of the Quality of EOD Soldiers we send, and not the Quantity we can ship.