

**BLOOD ON THE RISERS: UNETHICAL CHOICES HAVING
UNFORTUNATE CONSEQUENCES**

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ORGL 610/COML 597 – Communications and Leadership Ethics

September 13, 2015

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Introduction

On a beautiful September day in 2013 an Air Force C130 filled with sixty Army paratroopers takes off on a routine training mission from Pope Air Field, North Carolina. Approximately ten minutes into the flight the jumpmaster team stands up, faces the crowded aircraft, and begins the pre-jump voice and arm commands with “TEN MINUTES”, and quickly follows with “GET READY”. Soon all the paratroopers are standing up, with their parachutes static line hooked to the anchor line cable in the aircraft and are anxiously awaiting the final commands during the last three minutes before they are allowed to march toward the paratroop door, and vigorously exit the aircraft. The doors open, wind rushes inside the aircraft, the jumpmaster leans outside the aircraft, spots his reference points, returns inside and faces his jumpers, and then shouts his second to last command at the jumpers, “STAND BY”. The number one jumper, hands his static line to the Safety, turns into the door, and waits the green light and the final command before jumping out the door. The green light then illuminates, “GO” is sounded, the first paratrooper takes a step, leaps, and disappears out the door.

On September 23, 2013, Colonel Wright, director of plans XVIII Airborne Corps, husband, father, exited a C130 for a final time. The cause of the accident was physics. Colonel Wright with his MC-6 parachute left the aircraft awkwardly that caused a malfunction in his parachute to fully open. He managed to pull his reserve parachute but far too late for it to provide any additional lift capability that would have saved his life.

This paper highlights this accident not to remind that airborne operations are dangerous, but this unfortunate event shows how leadership principles and how ethics were conflicted in the events leading to the jump. Immediately following the accident an investigation began, revealing the ultimate cause, but it also revealed some questionable ethics, and Army value violations by senior leaders in the XVIII Airborne Corps. This paper provides analysis of this tragedy reviewing moral sensitivity and moral judgment of Colonel Wright, and attempts to break down moral reasoning why this happens. The hope is to provide a path towards a better outcome and to further understand why leaders sometimes fail to act appropriately and consider all the consequences for their actions.

Moral Recognition

How did Colonel Wright consider his choices, how his behavior affected others, and determine the consequences for his actions (Johnson, 2011, pp. 236-237)? Was his and other senior leaders' moral sensitivity clouded and why? The investigation findings reveal some facts noting, "that Wright lacked recent experience and sufficient training" (Dolasinski, 2014, p. 1). Additionally, the investigation report concluded, "that VIP culture enabled him to skip procedures that all jumpers are required to go through" (p. 1).

Colonel Wright, a master parachutist (over 65 static line jumps and qualified jumpmaster), and over 25 years in the Army, had just returned to Fort Bragg after years of being off airborne status. He was a seasoned, well-liked, respected leader. After arriving on Fort Bragg, he attended the one-day basic refresher that all paratroopers must complete before jumping. He did not jump within 30 days following refresher which policy states that Soldiers must go back through refresher prior to completing a first jump. He was allowed to jump an MC-6 parachute, which he was not adequately trained

on, and normally reserved for General Officers. He failed to take part in pre-jump rehearsal training that morning which is mandatory for all jumpers. The morning of the jump, Colonel Wright was confronted by a peer senior officer, who warned him about the parachute, and that jumpers get hurt by not being trained. If Colonel Wright's moral sensitivity was clouded, this should have forced clarity. With all of this, Colonel Wright still decided he was good.

Moral Judgment, Motivation, Character

James Rest model of ethical behavior believed moral judgment could be explained through developmental schema, with the least developed schema based on personal interest and the most developed based on shared ideals. (Johnson, 2011, pp. 241-242). Had Colonel Wright been anyone of lesser rank, and with a less position, he would not have been allowed to continue. His judgment on 23 September was based on personal interest, avoiding rules and safety precautions, because he wanted to jump the MC-6 parachute, and become current in airborne operations. He did not want to self admit his lack of training, and go through retraining, most likely because his time was too valuable. The conclusion would be that Wright's level of judgment, as per Rest's model, would have been much more developed, especially as a senior officer in the Corps.

Perhaps the fact he was senior ranking, and he did understand what he could get away with, no questions, influenced his motivation to make the less ethical choice. Johnson (2011) writes, "that self-interest and hypocrisy undermine moral motivation. Sometimes individuals genuinely want to do the right thing, but their integrity is overpowered when they discover that they will have to pay a personal cost for acting in an ethical manner" (p. 244). A guess is that Colonel Wright understood the time it would

cost him to retrain, and therefore chose to not follow safety measures rather than self-correct.

The final component in James Rest's moral behavior model is character, which includes traits of integrity, humility, and personal courage (Johnson, 2011, pp. 245-246). There is no doubt through testimony from friends and colleagues that Colonel Wright was a fine leader, and was of great personal character. Why then would he choose a wrong over a right? The Army leadership values are to lead by example and do what you would have others do. Above all, follow the standard, be respectful of position and title, and have integrity. So why were these values not followed? Again, a guess would be a moment of weakness for personal gain, and a situation in which his rank and experience blinded other people from interfering. His decisions were not completely alone. The "VIP Culture" of the organization, allowed him to miss important safety rehearsals prior to jumping.

Potter Box Analysis

Another method of dissecting Colonel Wright's choices is through Ralph Potter's Box model for reasoning which is separated with four dimensions (definition, values, principles, and loyalties) for analysis of moral decision making (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel, & Woods, 2013, p. 3). The first question beyond defining the situation, is identifying what values were in question? The Army values involved are integrity and respect. Integrity is often referred to in the Army as doing what is right even when no one is looking or putting being right, ahead of being popular. Another Army value is "Duty" which could have weighed heavy on Colonel Wright mind; getting current on airborne operations, being efficient in the workplace, and fulfilling obligations.

Respect, as an Army value is treating people fair and kind, and not abusing positions of authority. It is fair to say that Colonel Wright pushed the limits of his authority by not self-admitting, thus violating the respect value. Once values are defined, the Potter box analysis then moves to principles.

Two ethical principles stand out. Leader privilege, that is, taking an easier route because he was in position to do so. This is highlighted by Colonel Wright's failure to show up on time for the jump rehearsal. The second principle is honesty. Jumping an MC-6 parachute which he had no recent or adequate training with, and knowing that his basic refresher training was over 30 days old. All Soldiers are required to abide by both these safety precautions. As a leader, he would not be questioned. The final quadrant in the Potter Box is loyalty.

Colonel Wright's loyalty was with himself rather than the standard safety procedures. The other loyalty he had was with the XVIII Airborne Corps headquarters. Two other Colonels also jumped the MC-6 parachute (normally reserved for just General Officers) and also did not go through rehearsal training with the other jumpers. This was noted in the investigation report as part of a "VIP culture". As a senior leader, time is very limited, and many leaders would often show up late to an operation and for-go the rehearsals. Although this was normal, the Soldiers noticed. There are safety precautions for a reason when conducting something as dangerous as an airborne operation. This "VIP Culture" was an obvious wrong in an otherwise disciplined and respected unit. Colonel Wright's tragic accident would at least serve as a catalyst for change.

Necessary Changes

Upon hearing of the factors associated with the case, Lieutenant General Anderson, the XVIII Airborne Corps Commander, would institute change. For starters, he responded demanding that the VIP culture stop immediately. There would be no more exceptions to the rules, regardless of rank. Only General Officers were afforded the privilege of using the MC-6 steerable parachute. Immediately, the Airborne Standard Operation Procedure be re-looked and updated to reflect any changes. LTG Anderson reinforced that jumpmaster teams had authority to remove anybody off of a manifest for any non-compliance, or safety violation with regards to airborne operations. There would be nobody exempt to this and everybody jumping would be present at all rehearsals.

Reflections

The most unethical decision of Colonel Wright is not being honest with himself, and the jumpmaster team. “We need reflection and deliberation to identify the good needed for a given moment and situation” (Arnett, Fritz, Bell, 2009, p. 7). Had he removed himself from the jump, this tragic accident would never have unfolded. It was a series of bad choices that led to him boarding that C130. Had he made a proper exit from the aircraft, his chute would have inflated and he would have safely landed. Had he pulled his reserve a few seconds earlier, his reserve would have had enough lift to save him from his fall. If he had done all this, would the VIP Culture have continued?

Why was the “VIP Culture” allowed to exist? Were the senior leaders of the Corps so well trained and experienced that they could show up late, not participate in key rehearsals, and jump special parachutes? Did the organization’s senior leaders consider themselves privileged because their demanding schedules afforded only small windows before their next engagement? Why weren’t the senior leaders able to see themselves

through Soldiers eyes? Is s VIP culture a problem an absolute in all organizations or is it relative to the Army and other military branches? Is it ethically relative to only this situation and if so does that justify it more? There is an importance of weighing each before justifying bad from good. This is not a case of absolute wrong but certainly shares common values with that of other large organizations that believe not leading by example, is not leading well (Hinman, 2012, pp. 46-48).

Brown and Trevino (2006) quote Bandura “Ethical leaders are credible because they are trustworthy and practice what they preach. If models do not abide by what they preach, why should others do so?” (p. 597). Leaders need to be leaders and set the example through their actions whether in the Army or leading an organization. Brown and Trevino state “leaders who set clear principles and standards must be exact in applying them to themselves and others in order to be seen as ethical leaders. Otherwise they run the risk of being seen as hypocritical...failing to apply [ethical standards] consistently” (p. 603). The Army most senior leaders echo this principle as well. The Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond Chandler (2014) highest ranking non commissioned officer, writes:

Being an Army professional means a total embodiment of the Warrior Ethos and the Army Ethic. Our Soldiers need uncompromising and unwavering leaders. We cannot expect our Soldiers to live by an ethic when their leaders and mentors are not upholding the standard. These values form the framework of our profession and are nonnegotiable. (p. 2)

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