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“The platoon is a gun, the platoon sergeant the bullets, and you are the safety catch.”

Most soldiers do not want to kill. Almost all of us have an inherent belief that killing is wrong. However, the situations we find ourselves in often mean we are forced to consider the use of lethal force.

Our training helps us differentiate between threat and appropriate use of force, but also, by its very nature, makes it easier for us to kill. Moreover, the environments to which we deploy increasingly display large and growing grey areas where threats and rules of engagement can be interpreted in a number of ways. Thus it falls to the junior tactical commander on the ground to not only make the correct judgements given the situation, but to maintain a sense of morality in seeking the right course of action

I distinctly remember sitting in Sandhurst, trying not to nod off, through one of the many morality lectures. I found them boring, as to me it was explaining the obvious. ‘Morality, as a leader is something you have to hold inside you, like a moral compass’, they said. ‘Well then’, I thought, ‘why are you harping on about it so much.’ To me, at the time, it seemed the least important, most obvious lesson I had learnt at Sandhurst to date. How wrong I was.

Killing, whatever its form, can be morally corrosive. Mid-intensity counter insurgency, with its myriad of complex situations, an enemy who won’t play fair and the constant, enduring feeling of being under threat, compounds such corrosiveness. A good tactical leader must recognise this and constantly maintain the morality of those he commands.

In 7 Platoon I was lucky to have an excellent working relationship with both my sergeants during our tour of Afghanistan. I was also lucky in that my platoon did not contain any psychopaths, which studies show make up about two per cent of any army. Thus especially at the beginning of the tour, it was relatively easy to maintain a sense of morality amongst the platoon. But when the threat to our lives increased, as the Taliban began fighting increasingly dirty, as the civilians became indifferent and as we were either nearly killed or took casualties, this became increasingly difficult. Soldiers who did not want to kill for no reason began to become unconcerned.

There is a balance to be struck between morality and operational effectiveness, between

softness and hardness. It is a fine line to walk, but one which must be walked nonetheless. My platoon sergeant would always strive to keep the soldiers sharp, aggressive and ready to fight their way out of any situation. 'I would rather be judged by twelve than carried by six' was his watchword at our platoon discussions on rules of engagement scenarios. He was completely right, and the robustness he bred into the platoon, especially at the psychological level, would stand it in good stead during the most testing parts of the tour.

However, as a junior officer I felt the need to morally temper what the platoon sergeant had said to the men. His could not be the final word on the subject. I would take their point of view and use it to explain a complex situation as best I could. In the morping, grey conflict we found ourselves in I pointed out that the civilians, even if they were untrustworthy and indifferent, were still our best form of force protection. They told us where the IEDs were. If we lost them, we lost everything. Therefore, we had to maintain the softer approach at first. We had to smile and we had to joke and we had to be friendly, even if it was the last thing we felt like doing. We had to not shoot them if we could avoid it in any way. We had to treat captured Taliban correctly. Otherwise we might as well not bother coming out here.

I think, in hindsight, this unacknowledged agreement I had with my platoon sergeant worked well. He kept the platoon sharp and ready—'loaded' as it were—and I just made sure the gun didn't go off at the wrong place at the wrong people. As the tour progressed and the commanders and rangers alike became increasingly familiar with their surroundings and the situations they found themselves in, but also increasingly frustrated, it became my primary role. The platoon was so well drilled it barely needed me for my tactical acumen. But they did need me for that morality.

Sometimes I felt my own morality begin to slip, that hardness creeping in. Sometimes I thought that I was soft, that my platoon sergeant was right and I should shut up and get on with it. Sometimes I'm sure the platoon felt like that! I was unsure. And at these times my memory would flit back to Sandhurst, to the basics, and I would find renewed vigour that what I was saying was indeed right. My moral compass, for all its wavering, was still pointing North. And that was the most important lesson I was taught in Sandhurst, and that I learnt in Afghanistan.