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Virtuous Leadership in Combat

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Abstract

This paper examines MacIntyre's (2000) claim that moral agency might be recovered by military training and experience among those whose social circumstances frustrated its earlier development. The paper explores autonomous moral agentic leadership amongst frontline leaders in extreme physiological and psychological environments. It does this through reporting results from a qualitative research study conducted between 2017 and 2022, which explored the self-perceptions of British Infantry frontline leaders who fought in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014. Vignettes from this conflict evidence morally agentic decision-making, which conflicted with both earlier socialisation and with orders. The study found that virtues including prudence, justice, and compassion enabled a small group of frontline leaders to manage ethically problematic situations while under significant physiological and psychological stress, preserving the mission's legitimacy. Developing such virtues can reduce the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviour and increase resistance to moral disengagement, even during elevated levels of stress. While well-known examples of moral failure by servicemen and women suggest that socialisation can result in moral failure, this paper provides empirical evidence for MacIntyre's positive claims that military training and experience enhances moral agency.

Keywords: MacIntyre, Afghanistan, Military Ethics, justice, compassion, prudence

Introduction

The British Army defines armed conflict as a violent and unpredictable situation that demands exceptional leadership driven by values and service to others. According to the Army's Land Operations Publication (ADP10, 2017), leadership is crucial in the human component of fighting power, which requires autonomous decision-making. This philosophy, known as Mission Command, emphasises flexibility, adaptation, mental agility, and individual initiative (p. 3-14) while upholding their core values of courage, discipline, respect for others, integrity, loyalty, and selfless commitment (ADP, 2000). However,

it is important to note that, as Lord Moran warns, while the environment and weaponry may change, the nature of a soldier remains constant:

I contend that fortitude in war has its roots in morality; that selection is a search for character and that war itself is but one more test - the supreme and final test if you will - of character. Courage can be judged apart from danger only if the social significance and meaning of courage is known to us; namely that a man of character in peace becomes a man of courage in war. He cannot be selfish in peace and yet be unselfish in war. Character, as Aristotle taught, is a habit, the daily choice of right and wrong; it is a moral quality which grows to maturity in peace and is not suddenly developed on the outbreak of war (Moran, 1967, p. 170).

This virtue-based understanding aligns with the claim of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2000) that moral agency might be recovered through military training and experience amongst those whose social circumstances frustrated its earlier development. While popular and well-known accounts of moral failure by servicemen and women apparently conflict with Lord Moran's account of character and MacIntyre's claim that military socialisation can enhance virtues, this paper surfaces the impact of military training and experience on moral agency in extreme environments through exploring autonomous moral agentic leadership amongst frontline British Infantry leaders who fought in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014. Vignettes from this research provide evidence of morally agentic decision-making that conflicts with leaders' earlier socialisation and with orders. The paper proceeds as follows: Section One, Virtue-Based Leadership, outlines the theoretical foundations that inform this paper. Section Two, Methods, outlines the research programme undertaken and how the findings that inform this paper are presented. Section Three, Autonomous Leadership and Character in Combat, provides findings that speak to context. Section Four provides three Vignettes that illustrate how the virtues informed the decision-making of autonomous leaders, Section Five discusses these findings, and Section Six concludes.

Section One: Virtue-Based Leadership

Throughout history, virtues have held a significant place in various ethical and philosophical traditions (Snow, 2018), and from the works of philosophers, theologians, and psychologists, contemporary accounts of virtues have emerged. According to Hursthouse and Pettigrove, virtue theory differs from

other ethical frameworks, such as consequentialism or deontology, by emphasising the importance of cultivating virtuous character traits rather than focusing solely on the consequences of actions or adherence to moral rules. It places emphasis on the development of virtues to guide decision-making and promote personal and societal flourishing (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2003). Virtues possess inherent benefits in a broad sense, and according to Foot human beings are unable to function effectively in their absence. Foot contends that individuals who possess insufficient courage and lack temperance and knowledge are unlikely to thrive in their personal endeavours. Similarly, she posits that communities that lack justice and charity tend to be unfavourable environments for habitation, as exemplified by the oppressive Stalinist regime in Russia or the influence of the Mafia in Sicily (Foot, 1978, pp. 10-24). MacIntyre (2004) argues that virtues help individuals navigate dilemmas, make sound decisions, and live in alignment with what contemporary agents might refer to as values, which Aristotelians view as a ranking of goods (MacIntyre, 2016, passim).

Aristotle believed that virtue is the desirable middle ground between extremes and that virtuous actions are achieved by finding the right balance between excess and deficiency in our actions and emotions (II.VI, 1106b-1107a)[1]. He defined courage as between recklessness and cowardice (III.VI-IX), temperance as between indulgence and abstinence (III.IX-XII), and justice as the midpoint between the equitable distribution of either too much or too little resources and giving people what they deserve (V.I-X). Aristotle believed the intellectual virtue of prudence (*phronesis*), which is not simply a faculty for applying rules but more for accurately perceiving situations, allows the wise person to identify the appropriate virtue and its mean point in each situation (VI.VIII, 1142a). Finding the mean is more than finding a mathematical midpoint, according to Aristotle. For instance, he notes that six pounds of food may be the midpoint between ten and two, but it may be too much for a young child, and experts should establish the mean based on the situation (II.IV, 1106b) and reason, concerned with what is good and bad for a person (VI.V, 1140b). Virtues and their mean are cultivated by practice and application, which Aristotle equates with skill acquisition because practical experience provides the knowledge needed for a particular action (II.I, 1103b). Aristotle held that builders learn by building, and lyre players learn by

[1] Bekker numbers relate to book, chapter, and section within Crisp (2004) translation of *Nichomachean Ethics.*

playing and in the same manner, people gain moral virtue by doing virtuous deeds, justice through just actions, temperance from temperate actions, and courage from courageous actions (II.I, 1103b).

On Aristotle's account a crucial element of developing intellectual and moral virtue is habituation in appropriate activities which require learning through interacting with others. He emphasised the importance of dialogue, debate, and collaboration in the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding (VI.IX, 1142b). Learning through interacting with others fosters the exchange of ideas, perspectives, and knowledge, leading to personal growth and understanding. He suggests that virtues are developed through our actions and interactions with others leading people to become just or unjust, courageous, or cowardly based on how we treat others. Similarly, our conduct in dealing with appetites and anger determines whether we become temperate or intemperate (II.I, 1103b). Moreover, Aristotle notes that we can gauge a person's character by observing the pleasure or pain they experience from their actions. For instance, he states that temperance is seen in those who find enjoyment in abstaining from excessive bodily pleasures, while intemperance is evident in those who find this oppressive. Similarly, he asserts that courage is displayed by those who face danger without pain, while cowardice is shown by those who find it painful. Aristotle asserts that character is influenced by the pleasures and pains we associate with certain actions, which is why he believed that habituation in an appropriate upbringing and education are required to guide people towards the right things and away from excess or deficiency in such pleasures and pains (II.III, 1104b). Aristotle's warning on the consequences of habituation is evident in his statement that the quality of a political system hinges on how legislators shape the habits and behaviours of citizens from an early age. He emphasizes that this factor determines people's behaviour (II.I, 1103b). Aristotle argued that the friendship of virtuous people is crucial for the cohesion of cities, as it represents the highest form of justice. He praised this type of friendship, highlighting its ability to thrive through interactions, mutual development, and the collective progress of individuals (VIII.I-X). This is since each person absorbs favourable impressions from one another, leading to the popular adage, "from noble people..nobility" (IX.XII, 1172a).

According to the contemporary Aristotelian Alasdair MacIntyre (2000) the stability of human life relies on individuals who provide security against external and internal threats, even at the cost of their own lives. Trusting the military is crucial because we entrust our lives and safety to them. MacIntyre argues that

proper training is necessary to ensure that the military use coercive violence responsibly, prioritising the well-being of the community over their own. He specifically highlights the US Marine Corps as an example of an institution that instils such values and dispositions. MacIntyre references *'Making the Corps'*(Ricks, 1997) when he states the individuals who undergo this training are typically considered to be of low potential according to societal norms. Ricks asserts recruits often consist of individuals who were unsuccessful under the guidance of their high school teachers, with over half of them having a history of drug use, encounters with the legal system, or other difficulties. Despite this, MacIntyre contends that upon completion of their basic training, individuals who have successfully endured the rigorous programme not only demonstrate exceptional proficiency in their respective roles, but also exhibit notable strides towards assuming future non-commissioned leadership positions within the Corps. This includes those who, in their capacity as drill instructors, will be responsible for instructing prospective recruits. MacIntyre posits that this transition occurs during Marine basic training not only because it is demanding, enabling recruits to extend their powers and test themselves against exacting standards, but also through instilling a sense of responsibility to others. In the case of the US Marine Corps MacIntyre suggests others are categorised as both the American people who entrust their safety to the US military, and to other Marines without whom military operations could not be achieved successfully. MacIntyre suggests that Marine basic training instils the concept that success or failure is viewed on the collective level which also instils an intense sense of dependence on others as having put their life into one another's hands (MacIntyre, 2000).

Section Two: Methods

This research was motivated by the first authors experience of facing moral ambiguity in the use of lethal force in high-pressure situations. Over his 28 years of deployments spanning counterinsurgency, war, peacekeeping, and post-war operations, culminating in a deployment to Helmand Province with 3 Commando Brigade (LWC, 2015, pp. xxiv), he observed that his responses to what would superficially present as similar threat to life scenarios were never the same. 3 Commando Brigade were operating in a particularly hostile area of Helmand Province however there were distinct differences in how units and indeed individual soldiers were operating (Huntley, 2014, pp. 1-3) this led him to explore why some soldiers choose to use lethal force while others did not in seemingly identical circumstances. The first

named author's research had personal meaning as he believed that encapsulating the perceptions of soldiers who had experience in using lethal force may help a future generation of soldiers facing moral ambiguity when considering lethal force. By doing so, the first named author hoped not only to contribute to the discourse on moral agency, but also towards the advancement of soldiering as a practice within the tradition of military service.

Bryman (1988) asserts that doing research in any organisation is difficult with Soeters et al (2014, p. 3-34) arguing this is especially true when conducting research within the military environment. They state this is due to the military being "a world on its own, an island within society-at-large on which its inhabitants work and live together." Massey and Tyerman (2023) highlight the difficulty civilian researchers face in accessing notoriously closed and secretive military institutions with Basham and Catignani (2021, p. 211-230) reporting that even with access they faced obstacles such as dealing with masculinised cultures, bureaucratic scrutiny, robust military gatekeeping, refusals to engage, and indifference. Soeters et al suggest that resistance is in-part due to the military's involvement in organised violence, lethal force, and the secrecy surrounding their contributions to national security. Moreover, they assert that external researchers face additional challenges in exposure to events they are researching due to the resistance from military organisations to allow them to engage in activities that are either secretive or beyond the safety of heavily guarded military bases. Spencer (1973, p. 12) argues that some armed forces are reluctant to participate in external research due to concerns about revealing internal mistakes or negative portrayals of the military. Irwin (2011, p. 13) notes that for these reasons military gatekeepers often preference internal researchers as they are not only exposed to activities being researched but are also aware of the sensitivities of the information they may obtain. Furthermore, he states that due to the risks of reputational harm and compromising sensitive information posed to the military by external researchers it is not surprising that armed forces around the world typically establish internal research functions and prefer lived-experience researchers with previous or current service. Recent studies on military character and leadership, including those by de-Vries (2013), Hodges (2014), Olson (2014), Randal (2002), Robinson (2007), Walker (2010), Walker et al. (2018) and the doctoral research that informs this article (Redgwell, 2022), have utilised lived-experience research methodologies.

Despite being very much an inhabitant of the 'military island' gaining permission to conduct qualitative research on lethal force in Afghanistan was not easy. For reasons stated by Soeters et al (2014, pp. 3-19) and Spencer (1973, p. 12) compounded by the fact that Operation Northmoor[2] was as active investigation and the research participants and the first named author were deployed into the same area where Sergeant Blackman from 42 Commando was convicted for unlawfully killing a mortally wounded Taliban fighter[3], there was initial resistance to conduct qualitative research on the use of lethal force in Afghanistan. While the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly in a large organisation such as the British Army (Irwin, 2011, pp. 14-15) there is more than one way to increase the chances of gaining access. Access was gained here, as with Irwin (2011) through a friend who was also a highly decorated special forces officer. A meeting with a senior General in which both the firs-named author's operational experience and the purpose of the study was discussed provided assurances that information obtained would not be at risk of miscommunication or misinterpretation which Soeters et al (2014) suggest, may not be the case for someone without direct exposure to combat experience. Soeters et al note that researchers were not allowed beyond the protection of fortified bases in Afghanistan (p. 13) underpinning the argument that a researcher who had not faced choices around the use of lethal force would lack both understanding and credibility within a Gadamerian (1975) research conversation. They would be unable to truly grasp the intense emotions, physical sensations, and psychological impact that come with being in combat. Additionally, due to the chaotic and complex nature of combat and complex expeditionary missions there may be certain aspects of lethal force scenarios that would be difficult to convey or fully understand without having personally experienced them. These epistemological views align with MacIntyre (1988) who proposes "there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other." MacIntyre also rejects detached objectivity and argues that those outside a tradition lack sufficient rational, and indeed moral, resources for enquiry whereas progress only

[2] Investigation into alleged unlawful activity by United Kingdom Special Forces in their conduct of deliberate detention operations (DDO) in Afghanistan during the period mid-2010 to mid-2013.

[3] The incident took place in Helmand Province during Operation Herrick 14, part of the British effort in the war in Afghanistan. Blackman, of J company, 42 Commando Royal Marines was part of a patrol that came across an Afghan fighter in a field wounded by Apache helicopter gunfire. Blackman ordered the Afghan to be moved out of sight of the Kestrel surveillance system, a camera on a balloon above British Forward Operating Base Shazad covering the area Blackman's patrol had been sent to. Video evidence played at the Marines' subsequent trial shows some of the patrol dragging the man across the field and then kicking him. Blackman ordered Marine B and C to stop administering first aid to the insurgent and eventually shot the man in the chest with a 9 mm pistol saying: "It's nothing you wouldn't do to us." He then added: "I just broke the Geneva Convention".

occurs via participation in the internal dialectic, or "conflict," of a tradition. MacIntyre encapsulates this, which he designates "tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry." The emergence of true understanding through intimate engagement (Gadamer 1975, MacIntyre 1988, pp. 349-370) was facilitated by a military tradition that was shared between the first-named author and the study's participants. This shared appreciation of social structures, roles and conceptual, linguistic, and cultural frameworks enabled the conditions and constraints upon agency to be apparent to both the first named author and research participants without hesitation. Gadamerian conditions for research conversations were thereby met (Gadamer, 1975).

Purposive sampling was used to select soldiers from two combat-experienced Infantry battalions who were not in mental or physical recovery from combat and had the experience and ability to communicate recollection in a natural and authentic manner. Because the dialogues would cover broad subjects to create story-telling narratives, participants needed to freely express their experiences. To follow philosophical hermeneutics and allow the soldiers to tell their story from their perspective without limiting their ability to articulate their experiences, 14 semi-structured 45 minute conversations using Spradley's (1979) "grand tour" questions, which not only allowed the soldiers to verbally explore a known topic but due to the sensitive nature of discussing lethal force, avoid what Rowley calls participant and researcher fatigue (Rowley, 2012, pp. 260-271). Gadamer also warns that unconscious researcher compulsion may occur if researchers' opinions are not responsive to the argument and are instead a prearranged set of questions and answers (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 383-396), as occurred in my disastrous pilot interviews (Redgwell, 2022, pp. 163-167).

Two distinct methods of data analysis were employed: thematic analysis as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2012) and the hermeneutic circle of Gadamer (1975, pp. 267-273). While the interviews were conducted in less than four months to accommodate the two battalions upcoming operational deployment commitments, the subsequent analysis was a lengthy process involving multiple reflection periods influenced by conversations with critical friends, which helped to develop a more detailed picture of what Heidegger would refer to as the phenomenon that, for the most part, does not manifest itself and is hidden in plain sight (Heidegger, 1927). The 14 conversations generated 591 minutes of audio files producing 84,624 words which were uploaded to the computer data analysis software NVivo which

allowed the first named author to manage, analyse, and visualise data systematically and individually. Due to the volume of data NVivo was used because of its ability to run multiple search requests including word frequency reports, visualised graphics including word balls, theme and code relationship reports, and concise graphics showing themes, codes, and association graphics demonstrating how codes and themes were related. The complete analysis required four years and several repetitions of data re-familiarisation using the hermeneutic circle, which explores deeper into the meanings of the data each time. The lengthy analysis period also aligned to Gadamer's argument that time aids in the interpretation and objective evaluation of experiences via a phenomenon known as "temporal distance," in which the perceptions and phenomena associated with an experience become increasingly remote (Gadamer, 1975). Due to work and personal commitments beyond the doctoral journey, temporal distance occurred during the analysis period, resulting in a more sophisticated and frequently unique grasp of the data offered by distance and time, devoid of emotional distraction. This is what Gadamer refers to as the hermeneutic significance of temporal remoteness (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 290-298).

Throughout this period of temporal distance, the first named author's appropriately anonymised data was exposed to friends, family, professionals, and the first named authors PhD supervisory team which generated reflexivity. This mirrored Gadamer's notion of intersubjectivity in that other individuals do not limit one's understanding of life, as is evident when seeking advice, criticism, and ideas from others. Gadamer asserts, to begin with, that testing ideas on other people, such as during the research process, is essential to gaining a knowledge of the biases that shape our own judgments. Second, we acknowledge through debate that others have valid reasons to disagree with us, and we devise new ways to accommodate these perspectives (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 238-240). This paper offers three vignettes selected to illustrate the extensive discussions of moral development and moral agency to which participants attested.

Section Three: Autonomous Leadership and Character in Combat

Alongside several of the leaders who participated in this study, the first named author was deployed with 3 Commando Brigade between March and October 2011, operating within the same area as J Company 42 Commando and were in similar isolated locations known as platoon houses which were frequently

attacked day and night. Frontline leadership was exceptionally complex for several reasons. Firstly, these leaders were fighting an insurgency which was difficult to combat due to the nature of guerrilla warfare. Second, the terrain was challenging and unfamiliar, which made it difficult to find and engage the enemy. Third, their mission was complex, involving a range of military and civilian agencies, each with their own priorities and objectives. Finally, the high tempo of operations and the constant threat to themselves and their soldiers' lives created an especially demanding environment, both in terms of decision-making and dealing with the psychological impact on their soldiers. Moreover, the study found that despite the hierarchical structure of the army, their primary sources of influence were their experiences of interacting with other people within specific communities. More experienced leaders were influenced by the interactions within the military community, while those with less than three years of service looked to their friends and family. When faced with moral ambiguity, these leaders tended to rely on social norms within these communities to guide their behaviour, rather than explicit military rules and regulations.

The military community was a particularly powerful influence with soldiers describing how they drew upon the social connections, camaraderie, and teamwork to form positive social connections with each other. There was a powerful sense of belonging and commitment to their unit, the larger army community, and the nation with a particular emphasis on the importance of respect for others and collaboration to achieve positive outcomes. Soldiers held themselves accountable not just to themselves or the leader role they were in, but also to the standards of their community which centred on justice. The soldiers' strong bonds of trust, loyalty, and friendship, as well as their resilience and well-being, were established through shared experiences of hardship and danger. The military community cultivated character traits that guided behaviour towards seeing all people as equals regardless of their background or the fact they were from another community. Soldiers reported that the military supported ongoing interactive activity, enabling learning by doing with the opportunity to observe and replicate positive community-centred behaviours in peace time which developed the virtues of prudence, justice, and compassion which were established enough to not only withstand the change in social structure between peace and war, but also the negative influences of combat. Soldiers stated that these virtues guided positive behaviours when faced with ambiguous situations where using lethal force was a consideration.

These soldiers reported a sense of pride and self-worth in protecting vulnerable Afghan non-combatants from the trauma of living in a war zone. They found that positive interactions with other soldiers who valued and practiced justice helped them develop an ability to read environmental cues which informed their decisions. Learning from trusted comrades enabled these soldiers to translate situations which appeared similar but where justice required different responses depending on the context. For example, Steven (P6), who served twice in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2009, indicated that if pre-deployment training alone served as the basis for action, an inability to integrate current variables into actual knowledge could have disastrous consequences. Steven stated:

Two people can see the same thing but come to a completely different decision, unfortunately for a farmer doing nothing more than working his land, some will see him as an IED layer which will have a catastrophic outcome (Steven, P6)

Paul (P11), a soldier in Steven's team, demonstrated how his interactions with other soldiers who valued justice and compassion influenced his views on using lethal force:

To shoot another human being is an act so un-natural that it takes a lot to cross the threshold into pulling the trigger. At the end of the day, it's someone's dad, brother, or son and that's what you tend to see first when you're pointing your rifle at them, regardless of what they are doing. You don't see an insurgent anymore and you're faced with the dilemma of do I, or don't I, and must respect them as a human being first and foremost (Paul, P11).

Roger (P8) responded eloquently to the same issue, but he distinguished between innocent farming activity and aggressive insurgent IED behaviour by providing an example. Roger stated:

The first thought that engages in me is, we are living and operating within a farming community. There are going to be lots of people digging in the ground which does not make them a viable target, it doesn't mean you have to prosecute that target. You're at a crossroads of conflict between interpretation and rule. The rule is saying, shoot that person. You're conflicted by your interpretation of what you're seeing however experience and local knowledge translates that into the rule isn't saying shoot that person, the rule is saying, you're allowed to shoot that person if you think it is appropriate to do so. So, in that respect, it would be personal interpretation that decides (Roger, P8).

During a conversation, Peter (P2) was asked to elaborate on a remark about influencing others through his presence and behaviour. Peter mentioned a circumstance in which an inexperienced soldier with whom he was on sentry duty did not appreciate the importance of context. Peter stated:

He said to me, I don't know where you're coming from here because he's digging in the ground. I've been told I can shoot people digging in the ground, what's your problem? I think then the best I could do was try and educate him by talking him through the basic facts of what's happening. So, I said take a second and try and work this out. We're operating in a rural community, put yourself in his shoes. You are living in a rural community; you are going to dig in the ground to produce your livelihood. Is it anywhere near where we would get targeted? I explained the fundamentals of what was more likely to be going on and hopefully broadened his understanding and improved his decision-making process. I think he understood that just because he could didn't mean he needed to act on it. Not sure I would dress up as a farmer and test this though (Peter, P2).

The soldiers' virtues were demonstrated throughout the course of the six-month deployment and across different situations. Despite operating under challenging conditions, these leaders reported treating every individual they interacted with fairly and compassionately, including wounded and captured Taliban fighters. They provided practical examples to support their claims, such as the one mentioned above. While using the phrase 'respect of others' these soldiers described acts of justice and compassion which was not limited to members of their own unit, but also extended to non-combatants, and even Taliban fighters. These soldiers reported that even during intense combat situations they still treated those attacking them and their wounded more fairly and compassionately than they anticipated being treated themselves. Soldiers universally agreed that despite the Taliban having little respect for human life they felt that it was not relevant to how they treated them once they fell under their power.

The virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and compassion developed through exposure to the military community all played a role in the decision-making process regarding avoiding unnecessary suffering. Soldiers characterised their moral conduct as the adoption of right and wrong principles that served as guides and deterrents for their activities. Soldiers engaged in actions that increased people's well-being and evoked sentiments of satisfaction, self-worth, and pride. Concerned with the prospect of subsequent

self-condemnation had they acted viciously at the time, these positive and negative self-criticisms helped them maintain moral bounds in their conduct.

Acts of compassion were derived from an established capacity to read a situation accurately and prioritise the welfare of others over their own, which was strong enough to withstand the competing emotion of anger. As Kenny put it:

Two wrongs don't make a right and we are supposed to be above losing our composure when shit gets real – that's amateur hour behaviour which doesn't go down well with the guys (Kenny, P1).

Replicating immoral behaviour, according to these leaders, was a failure not only for the individual, but also for the team, resulting in a disrespect for the values of the soldiering community. The next section provides three examples of the exercise of moral agency that illustrate these findings.

Section Four: Vignettes

The first vignette was from a conversation with Roger (pseudonym), a military leader from a gypsy background operating within 3 Commando Brigade in Afghanistan. As a child and teenager, Roger routinely fell afoul of the law and was frequently on the edge of police attention, which was thrilling at the time and encouraged him to continue along that path. Roger stated that he joined the military after watching Iraq and Afghanistan on television and deciding he wanted to be a part of the action, which he found fascinating. Roger summarised his nine years of duty, which included two deployments to Afghanistan, as follows:

It's been exiting that's for sure. I joined up thinking I would struggle due to my background however I couldn't have been more wrong. I was accepted as a person and gained respect for what I did and how I bonded with my teammates. I thought my gypsy friends were tight, but this was like being in a group within a group that had higher standards and values than anything I had ever seen, and I liked it. Over time my teammates became personal mates, and I was always proud and appreciative of being part of this group and wanted to contribute to keeping it that way (Roger, P8).

As an example of this influence on his moral judgement, Roger highlighted how his attitudes towards theft were transformed by his military training and experience:

I thought nothing of the phrase 'you don't steal from your mates' before joining the army, now I know it's more about not stealing than who you steal from. I've been respected and treated as an equal since joining the army which allowed me to be the best I can. I know the value of respect and the impact of disrespect so when I'm making decisions that will impact upon people – respect is my starting point as I know it works – being respected gave me self-worth so it's how I treat people (Roger, P8).

In Roger's case, being immersed in a social structure with positive normative standards seemed to have not only influenced his understanding of right and wrong, but also ingrained it to the point where his military experiences had a greater impact than his previous social structure. Additionally, Roger demonstrated that having self-awareness and understanding others' emotions is crucial for making informed decisions.

The second vignette features Ted, a seasoned leader who served three tours in Afghanistan, including one with 3 Commando Brigade. Like Roger, Ted engaged in antisocial and criminal activities with his friends before joining the army. Ted expressed that those activities did not provide any real purpose or a sense of self-worth:

Most of my friends growing up tended to get their kicks from mucking about and doing what they wanted regardless. What was harmless fun at first turned into something altogether different as we got older. Vandalising cars and smashing windows didn't make me feel good about myself, so I stopped knocking about with that crowd (Ted, P9).

Ted emphasised how his military service and multiple tours in Afghanistan cultivated a profound sense of responsibility towards others. This awareness not only guided his moral judgments in various situations, but also deepened his connection between his role as a soldier within the military community and his role as a member of society:

If you don't know what you're trying to achieve its difficult to know if what you're doing is adding value or making things worse. It's easy to tell yourself the person digging on a track is an insurgent and use lethal force but get it wrong and you're responsible for generating increased hatred towards soldiers who are supposed to be making things better – not worse. I'm no genius but I'm sure shooting farmers isn't something that supports bringing peace to Afghanistan (Ted, P9).

Like Peter, Ted described how his military experience heightened his situational awareness, underscoring the significance of taking the local context into account when making decisions. He shared an example of a conversation he had with Jason, where like Peter's situation, he found himself on sentry duty with an inexperienced soldier who held different perspectives on the significance of a person digging on a track. Ted and Peter's examples demonstrate how these soldiers interpreted the same situation differently based upon their level of experience:

it gets as hot as the hell in Afghanistan during the summer and even the locals do their manual labouring at night because its cooler. Perhaps when you look through night vision equipment you can see he's in his eighties and doesn't want to die of heat exhaustion by digging in the day's heat. Then again, if I had not offered that point of view to Jason, he would have probably shot him based upon an inexperienced perception it was clearly a hostile intention and act (Ted, P9).

When asked why he did things that seemed at odds with what the rules of engagement in Afghanistan permitted him to do Ted said:

I'm proud to call myself a professional soldier and professional soldiers don't just shoot from the hip like some hired gunslinger. We are supposed to make things better for people who cannot protect themselves. I don't want to be held responsible for producing the next generation of insurgents or for making an already dangerous environment even worse for other units who deploy here after we leave (Ted, P9).

When asked about his motivation throughout his 16 years of service, which included multiple deployments and personal loss, Ted responded:

it gives that intense inner feeling of doing something good with your life and belonging to something bigger than you. The good times, bad times, and really bad times only make you want to be a part of the family even more knowing they would give their life for you knowing you would do the same for them without hesitation. It gives me such a good feeling that I can't imagine you could get anywhere else and that's what gets me out of bed every morning knowing not everyone can do what I do or have been where I have been. I can look at what I have achieved and will achieve with a sense of pride strong enough to die for (Ted, P9).

The third vignette brings us back to Roger. According to him, timing, and the need to accomplish a larger objective are closely tied to emotions and sound judgment. Roger highlighted this concept by sharing an example of a situation where his patrol in Afghanistan received an unexpected message from the patrol base:

The patrol base radioed through to me that an urgent compassionate message needed relaying to one of my soldiers. His father had been killed in a motorcycle accident and he needed to return to the UK. I chose not to pass the message on despite it being direction to do so because I felt it wasn't right to. The patrol base was two kilometres away and we would have to pass through a known Taliban stronghold to get there and I wanted everyone on their A game to prevent anyone getting hurt, there was no way I was delivering that message before we got back to base. For his sake and everyone else's I held on to it until we got back. It was his right to know but, in my judgement, then wasn't the time to tell him (Roger, P8).

Roger exhibited a profound comprehension of the pain, suffering, and potential consequences that a soldier may face when following an order as instructed. He responded with compassion, highlighting his empathetic abilities. By exercising prudence and compassion, Roger was able to resist the conflicting pressure of blindly obeying a superior officer's order. His courage, conviction, and contextual interpretation formed a strong basis for him to disobey the order. Roger further elaborated on how his anticipation of negative emotions and consequences played a pivotal role in his decision-making process:

It was more than simply following an order from someone who was not close enough to this situation to understand the implications of delivering that message as intended. I chose not to follow the order because I could imagine how I would feel hearing it and needed to consider the implications of him being in that frame of mind with a loaded weapon moving around other people. I also had to think about the impact of someone getting hurt due to his frame of mind – lack of focus can get someone killed as quick as a bullet would in Afghanistan. My gut instinct was on the balance of probability the right thing to do was to not follow the order (Roger, P8).

Roger's decision to defy a valid battlefield order, despite the potential risk to himself, exemplified his virtues of prudence, compassion, justice, and courage. By transcending his role as a military leader and going beyond blind obedience, Roger demonstrated his virtue of prudence by carefully considering and

ranking other values such of courage, integrity, loyalty, and selfless commitment along with his own goods of self-worth and pride. This ensured that his actions were proportionate and appropriate within the context of the military community's value in justice. Roger's virtues guided him to act wisely and with compassion recognising that following the legal order within the given situation would have caused unintentional harm.

Section Five: Discussion

This paper supports MacIntyre (2000) by showing how military training and experience can shape moral agency. The soldiers in this study reported good behaviours because they were part of a community that valued justice. A supportive environment gave the soldiers real-world experiences and opportunities for validating their views with others they trusted, helping them develop virtues like prudence, justice, and compassion. Cooperation, trust, and the desire to protect the disadvantaged typified this atmosphere which extended beyond the boundaries of the military community and even included the enemy as being subject to moral consideration. Positive examples and experiences that reinforced these characteristics helped soldiers learn and apply them subsequently developing into habits. Military service gave these soldiers a shared narrative and purpose that helped them understand their acts not only in the context of a larger organisation but also as a moral agent with responsibilities that exist beyond their role as a soldier. Their prudence balanced their activities against moral norms, showing moral reasoning and the ability to act as individuals while also being part of a wider community with common values and standards. As argued by MacIntyre (2000), the military community shaped these soldiers' ethics, accountability, and behaviour which encompassed all those they interacted with, including Taliban fighters. Their responsibilities and narratives were interwoven into a longer narrative of their lives that gave significance to the ethical issues they encountered in Afghanistan. Thus, soldiers were able to combine numerous trustworthy moral sources to better grasp their ethical responsibilities and handle their challenges with purpose and clarity.

MacIntyre argues that moral agents must understand that they are accountable not only to the standards of their role, but also to the moral principles that apply throughout their lifetime. A moral agent needs to be able to step outside of their role to evaluate behaviour against broader principles necessary for ethical

conduct when responsibility for actions has been abdicated, is uncertain, or is institutionally endorsed but in conflict with ethical standards (MacIntyre, 1999). Additionally, a moral agent may refuse to obey a command, or as Roger demonstrated, disobey a lawful order, even if compliance is considered normal and has no adverse repercussions. The soldiers who exhibited prudence, justice, and compassion were able to resist the negative psychological and physiological influences of combat and the competing demands of military obedience. These soldiers' moral virtues provided them with the necessary nuance to act appropriately and maintain their broader sense of moral responsibility, even in uncertain situations where obedience, as was the case in Milgram's (1963) experiment, offered a simpler but potentially harmful response. These soldiers were able to transcend their role and social structure, treating local Afghans as members of their own community, resulting in feelings of pride and self-worth.

This study not only found self-evaluations of morally upright behaviour but empirical exemplifications in situations where soldiers took risks to do the right thing. The contrast could hardly be sharper with such well known military atrocities as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam (Peers, 1970), the torture, degrading treatment, and killing of detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan (ADF, 2020, Aitken, 2013, Taguba, 2005, Gage, 2011, HMG, 2023) a list which includes the summary execution of a mortally wounded insurgent by British Marine A (Huntley, 2014) who had undergone similar training and enculturation as the soldiers in this study. Atrocities have commonly been accounted for by dynamics of power and authority central to the studies of Zimbardo (1971) and Milgram (1963) alongside processes of dehumanisation and othering. There is nothing in this research project that explains the contrast but in the context of the threats to moral agency posed by conflict situations it is important that research identifies both the dynamics by which it is undermined and those by which it is enhanced, as is the case here.

Section Six: Conclusion

Encouraging aggression is straightforward since it aligns with military training however, promoting restraint, particularly when an enemy is intentionally provoking a disproportionate response, is more challenging. Whilst situationists explain examples of abuse in military environments by drawing on social experiments that attest to the influence of novel pressures and of authority, the soldiers in this study acted virtuously within a context characterised by both of Milgram or Zimbardo's experiments yet despite

obedience to authority and rules being the easiest route through moral ambiguity, these leaders chose another course of action.

This study remained true to the virtues of prudence, justice, and compassion demonstrating that virtue can play a significant role in shaping behaviour even in highly regulated environments such as the military. They were able to recognise that following rules and regulations does not always equate to making the right moral choice and used the virtue of prudence to analyse their environment and make appropriate and proportionate choices. By doing so, they demonstrated the virtue of justice and demonstrated that individual virtues and personal values can influence behaviour even when in the face of extreme situations such as combat. Their willingness to take calculated risks and act as a moral agent, rather than just as an obedient military leader, was a demonstration of their established character. While senior leadership oversight can help ensure ethical behaviour, it is critical for all soldiers to internalise these virtues and uphold them in all situations, regardless of the presence or absence of oversight.

Aristotle held that prudence involved perceiving situations accurately as opposed to simply applying rules (VI.VIII, 1142a) and that moral agency requires more than just theoretical knowledge, it involves practical engagement and the development of virtues through lived experiences (II.I, 1103b). This research attests to these soldiers demonstrating they had opportunities to engage in activities associated with the practice of soldiering that developed the virtues of prudence, justice, and compassion. As Aristotle noted, it is through habituation and engagement in appropriate activities which make us either wise or unwise, just, or unjust, and temperate or intemperate (II.I, 1103b). Furthermore, as argued by Lord Moran (1967, p. 170), moral fortitude does not occur as the soldier steps onto the battlefield and one of the key conclusions of this paper is that the habituation into the virtues of prudence, justice, and compassion is likely to influence future behaviour after these soldiers leave the military, or at the very least that this is what they believe with Roger 's attitude to theft being testament to that. By promoting virtuous leadership and behaviour, military institutions can help ensure that soldiers not only operate within legal and ethical frameworks within peace and war, but within their subsequent social structures and communities.

This paper makes several important claims. Firstly, that a neo-Aristotelian understanding of virtue to interpret the impact of training and experience on military leaders in extreme conflict situations. Second

that Gadamerian conversations between people who have experienced the same conflict, its findings and illustrative vignettes demonstrate the type of genuine conversation that Gadamer's methods aimed to achieve. There are good reasons therefore to believe in the trustworthiness of these accounts. Third, that autonomous and morally agentic leadership has been evidenced in Helmand that the findings provide empirical support for MacIntyre's (1999) claim that military education characteristically enables the virtues to be recovered or enhanced.

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