

Duty, Honor (and Self)

By LUCIAN K. TRUSCOTT 3d

ALBUQUERQUE, N. M.—The real tragedy of Mylai remains obscure even after the Medina and Henderson trials dragged on in Calley's wake. The ultimate tragedy was not Calley: his killing was horrible enough. And it was not the cover-up which in its long-term effect on the Army will probably prove just as horrible. Rather, the real tragedy was Mylai as the culmination of several incidents which, taken together, indicate a disturbing degree of erosion of moral principle within the Army.

We forget quickly. Remember the Green Beret fiasco? And the bogus award of the Silver Star to the general in Vietnam? The Sergeant Major of the Army and his alleged implication in the club scandals? And the conviction of the Provost Marshal General—the top cop of the Army—for his illegal extracurricular activities? To name only a few. All involved senior individuals, and few, if any, of these scandals were brought to light by the Army.

The other services (Air Force, Navy) are fundamentally different from the Army. They exist for machines—machines which kill and destroy from twenty miles away or 30,000 feet up. Their killing is remote and impersonal. The Army, on the other hand—and most particularly, the infantry—exists for men to kill other men. Ordering, and especially leading men to hunt and kill men is infinitely more difficult. It requires a disparate form of discipline, the most nearly absolute form of power: that of a man directly over the life of another man. Not of man over man through machine, or of man over machine through man. The far more terrible risks taken by the man on foot in combat require this power, for on the ground, men die in the face of, and at the side of, other men. Absolute power is necessary in order to bring this about.

If we believe Lord Acton's statement that all power tends to corrupt and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, then the Army is the most susceptible of all the services to absolute corruption by those who serve in it. This corruption is at the heart of the Army's problem.

To put it simply, this corruption results from individual lust for advancement, the never-ending search for that absolute power over other men—perhaps as must be the search for money in civil life. Unfortunately, the ambitious Army officer has frequently found that he cannot advance and remain honest at the same time. This has certainly been the case in Vietnam—the war that has been allowed to become a punch on a promotion card.

A West Point classmate and friend of mine, recently promoted to brigadier general, admitted to me that he found he had to be dishonest to "do well" as a battalion commander in Vietnam. He had to falsify reports simply because there were not enough hours in the day to get everything done or undone. He had to lie to pass inspections and training tests; to control AWOL rates and venereal disease rates and court-martial rates; to keep ahead of his peers on all of the numbered charts that today measure success. Besides, he reports, "Everyone else was doing it." He had to be corrupt, for if he had not been, would he have been promoted to colonel, and then to brigadier general—and on and on?

This is the corruption that gnaws at the guts of our Army:

Corruption is an infantry commander being in a helicopter 1,000 feet over his men on the battlefield, instead of being down there with them. Would Mylai have happened if Koster and Henderson and Barker—all of whom have claimed that they saw and heard nothing—had been down on the ground where the killing was going on? Corruption is placing a man in command of a battalion or brigade for six months so he can get credit for command in combat, then moving him back to a trailer in a basecamp while his men remain in the field. Such rotation of commanders has been a practice in Vietnam right from the start, and it is corrupt because the men who fight there deserve better, and the country does.

Corruption is measuring the effectiveness of a commander (and a war) by the number of enemy his unit reports dead. Counting bodies is corrupt because it has led to inflated statistics, to lying, and because it is degrading to the commander, his men, and to the enemy, both living and dead.

And corruption is covering up a massive drug problem, or any mistake or tragedy.

The Army must be honest with itself and with its people. It has in the past. For years, the motto at West Point has been "Duty, Honor, Country," and in effect, this has been the motto of the Army. I was proud to serve under that motto. But I am not proud of what that motto has become. In Vietnam, it was very subtly changed by some very corrupt men to "Self, Duty, Honor, Country," and that is the erosion of moral principle within the Army.

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