

MARINE CORPS GAZETTE

www.mca-marines.org/gazette

July 2006

Artillery in transition, p. 26.

Historical hoax, p. 37.

Company Commanders—
Listen up!, p. 50.



Ethics for the Junior Officer

Is it ever okay to lie?

by Maj Joseph L. Moreno, USMCR

What exactly is a lie, and when is it okay to tell one? As Marine leaders we are always watched by our subordinates in everything we say and do, both on and off duty. One dishonest statement from your lips and all who hear it will either doubt you in the future or, even worse, follow your example.

Definitions

Good definitions make for clear ideas. We often speak of honesty and integrity, but what exactly do they mean? Here are some clear definitions with concise examples.

Honesty. Honesty means making your words fit reality or, specifically, to speak the truth about the past. For example, George Washington's father asks him, "George, did you cut down that cherry tree?" He replies, "Father, I cannot tell a lie. Yes, I cut down that cherry tree." In this example (at least according to fable), George Washington's words fit reality; therefore, his response was an honest one.

Integrity. Integrity means making reality fit your words. Simply put, it means to do what you say you are going to do. For example, George Washington's father tells George, "George, as part of your chores today, I want you to cut down that cherry tree." George's reply, "Yes, father, I shall cut down that cherry tree." At the end of the day if George has cut down the tree then he had the integrity to make it happen. In other words, he got results, or as we commonly say, mission accomplished. Another way to think of integrity is the ability to do what you are supposed to do.

What Is a Lie?

Poor planning can put people in a

situation where they may end up doing something unethical to fix a problem. A lie is the intention to deceive or not let the whole truth be known. But, there's more to it than that. Explicitly explaining the following definition of unethical behavior to your Marines will go a long way. Unethical behavior is (1) committing or soliciting an illegal act or (2) an intention to deceive or not let the whole truth be known. The following are four exceptions where deception would not be considered to be unethical.

- **Warfare.** Sun Tzu wrote, "All warfare is based on deception." We're talking about bona fide warfare between a country and its enemy, not between you and your neighbor. This deception is aimed directly at the enemy, not at a friendly intermediary.
- **Entertainment.** A deception for entertainment purposes means all involved are aware of the deception. For example, a quarterback fakes a handoff and drops back to pass; a magician performs a magic trick; you tell a joke, "Your shoelaces are untied."
- **Personal or professional business.**

☐ **Personal:** A social expectation of privacy that does not violate Marine Corps orders, law, etc. For example, you should not feel compelled to answer questions such as, what is your net worth, or whom did you vote for in the last election?

☐ **Professional:** The law sometimes allows deception, such as a police detective lying to a criminal in order to collect information, or as is the case with classified information, not revealing any knowledge of information to unqualified parties.

• **Social lie.** A social lie is an untruthful statement to protect the feelings of others and from which the lying party gains no benefit. For example, the commanding general invites you and your spouse to his home for dinner. During dessert you whisper to your spouse that the coffee tastes like turpentine. A minute later the general's wife asks you, "How do you like the coffee?" It is perfectly acceptable to answer, "Fine."

However, it is not okay to lie to your spouse, citing the personal or social exceptions above, for reasons such as "she wouldn't understand" or "it would hurt her feelings if she knew the truth" about something you did. When you lie on paper, such as backdating a document to deceive inspectors, it is called fraud. (This kind of fraud is a very common problem with quarterly consolidated memorandum receipt reconciliations, better known as CMRs.) But, backdating a promotion warrant, which is done openly, is not unethical.

Sometimes when Marines get into trouble they will speak the truth with the intention to deceive. This technique usually includes some sort of distraction to lead the audience down the wrong path. Once again, there is an intention to deceive that does not meet one of the four exceptions above, especially since the liar's sole purpose is to save his own hide.

These examples will not solve every ethical dilemma. There are ethical questions—such as is abortion okay under certain circumstances, or should the government enforce capital punishment—that are beyond the scope of this article. But, these are not issues that we face on a daily basis. Rather, the rules above should be good enough for most issues you face in the shop.

USMC

>Maj Moreno wrote this article while deployed to east Africa in support of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa where he served as a liaison officer based out of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya from March to September 2005. He is currently employed by Apple Computer, Inc.