Beyond Snapshots: Longitudinal Pathways and Moral Dead Ends in Military Ethics

David M. Bergman

Department of Leadership and Command & Control, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden, david.bergman@fhs.se

Publication date: 27 December 2025
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5324/eip.v19i2.6453

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This article examines ethical decision-making in military contexts from a longitudinal perspective, emphasising how cumulative risk factors, protective factors, and key decision points interact over time to shape outcomes. Drawing on normative ethical theories, classical social psychology, military doctrine, and historical case studies, the discussion moves beyond traditional cross-sectional approaches to consider the temporal and sequential nature of decisions. Particular attention is given to selection, training, organisational culture, and time in combat as determinants of ethical resilience or risk factors for 'moral dead ends'. The My Lai massacre is used as an illustrative case, visualised through a timeline that highlights the interaction of multiple contributory factors. The analysis suggests that ethical decision-making is rarely the result of isolated choices; rather, it emerges from a chain of preceding decisions and contextual influences. The study concludes by arguing that military ethics education should incorporate longitudinal analysis to better prepare leaders for the cumulative pressures of operational environments.

Keywords: Military ethics, Moral dead ends, Professional military education, Ethical resilience, Virtue ethics

Decisions without right or wrong

Military commanders are often compelled to make ethical decisions under difficult circumstances. Although ethics is important in all professions, military commanders are frequently required to make decisions "under conditions of enormous stress, when real noise, fatigue, sleep deprivation, poor food, and oppressive responsibility add their quotas to the ever-present threat of total annihilation" (Dixon, 1976, p. 32).

In his guiding principles for military ethics, the Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces likewise emphasises that military decisions are often made in situations where there is no absolute right or wrong (Överbefälhavaren, 2024). On the battlefield, ethical dilemmas tend to take the form of impossible decisions. Humanity and the avoidance of human suffering often conflict with the military

necessity of achieving victory in the most effective manner. Alongside ethics, the laws of war also address the principle of proportionality, which underlines that even well-considered decisions can never entirely avoid human suffering; rather, as its name suggests, such suffering must be in proportion to what one seeks to achieve.

Consequently, it is natural that professional military education (PME) includes the topic of military ethics and focuses on preparing leaders to make this type of decision. When faced with a specific situation, it is often too late to start thinking about your own values and incentives for making moral decisions. It will also most often not be possible to ask anyone else for guidance, let alone make a 'right' decision. Military leaders must also be able to motivate the choices they make and the orders they give. Thus, personal and professional ethics must be developed beforehand. This is done by studying normative ethical theories, but also naturally by examining and discussing case studies and current topics.

The present study

The present article adopts a conceptual and analytical approach slightly different from the conventional approach in PME. The primary aim was to develop a framework for understanding ethical decision-making in the military context through a longitudinal perspective. This involves examining how risk factors and protective factors can function as critical decision points on a timeline that ultimately shapes the available ethical options. By discussing moral outcomes not merely as isolated incidents or academic cross-sectional studies but as a cumulative result of sequential decisions and contextual factors, the paper seeks to highlight the temporal dimension of moral erosion and resilience.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. Normative ethical theories form the prescriptive backbone, as is often the case in military ethics education. Deontological and utilitarian perspectives are employed to illustrate the types of moral reasoning traditionally emphasised in military ethics education, while virtue ethics is used to highlight the role of professional character and ethos. To complement this dimension, the analysis draws on classical theories from cognitive and social psychology that highlight the foundation for moral reasoning and how individuals' decisions can be influenced by social and contextual factors. This methodological duality is drawn to be able to better analyse case studies longitudinally.

Historical cases such as the My Lai massacre, the abuses at Abu Ghraib, and the UN forces' limited mandate in Rwanda are used as examples and as illustrations not only of unethical conduct but primarily to identify how the sequential build-up of risk factors or omission from making specific decisions ultimately culminated in moral dead ends. This resembles the methodological approach of a root cause analysis, but expands on it, since the examined cases rarely have a single decisive cause. Instead, it is demonstrated that multiple interacting factors can constrain or shape ethical agency over time.

This methodological approach aims to move beyond the static 'snapshot' of the regular case study or academic cross-sectional study common in ethics education. The result is an analytical model that requires us to move towards complexity before drawing any conclusions, but above all highlights how different factors interact to produce trajectories that have the capacity to strengthen ethical resilience or can lead to moral dead ends.

The wish for simple answers

Despite the admitted complexity of any warzone, we humans are often predisposed to searching for simplistic answers. This is not unique to warfare, but it is often more noticeable in instances where someone behaves in an unethical or outright unlawful way. After-the-fact discussions often gravitate toward simple explanatory models focusing on individual factors (bad apples), social or organisational factors (rotten basket), or an enumeration of contributing factors.

Official explanations tend to gravitate towards individual explanatory models. For example, after the mistreatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the actions as an "isolated case" by a small number of individuals (U.S. Department of Defense, 2004). Likewise, in a speech, president George W. Bush (2004) attributed individual factors when he called it a "disgraceful conduct by a few American troops". At the same time, outside searches for the causes often point to organisational inadequacies. For example, Human Rights Watch (2004) discarded the idea that the pattern of behaviour could be described simply as acts of individual soldiers who broke the rules but attributed the blame to "[presidential] Administration policies" since they were collectively responsible for creating the climate that resulted in the incidents. Subsequent investigations often point to contributing factors without reaching any definitive conclusion. For example, the official Taguba report following the same incident pointed to "inexperienced guards, lapses in accountability, complacency, lack of leadership presence, poor visibility, and lack of clear and concise communication between the guards and the leadership" (Taguba, 2004, p. 30).

The problem (and perhaps part of the allure) with such explanatory models is that they are all 'true' in some regard. For example:

- "Just a few individuals" – Yes, all behaviour is done by individuals
- "An unhealthy culture" – Naturally, few behaviours occur in a vacuum.
- "Lack of experience" – Reasonably, no one becomes experienced without experiencing something for the first time.

In reality, human behaviour is complex and always the result of interaction between individual factors (cognitive ability, personality, training), social settings (cohesion, culture, norms), and the broader context (including environmental and temporal factors) (See, e.g., classical works such as Lewin, 1936; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Additionally, this interaction is not static but dynamic; and through their behaviour, individuals will, to varying degrees, affect themselves, their social setting, and contextual factors, forcing them to deal with the consequences of their own actions and decisions (or indecisions).

Humans have inherent cognitive limitations, with a preference for explanations that seem satisfactory, rather than optimal (Simon, 1955). We do not even have the capacity to comprehend the full complexity of all everyday situations around us. In effect, there is a need for heuristics and fixed explanatory models ("just a few bad apples", "a toxic culture"…) rather than an exhaustive analysis (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2009). This is especially true under conditions when the cognitive load is high. Such mechanisms illustrate why individuals and groups tend to gravitate towards reductionist narratives.

Overall, the explanatory models also shift towards assigning liability; i.e., finding those 'responsible', rather than understanding complex behaviour and its root

causes. In the wake of more serious incidents, legal trials or official investigations are by their nature aimed at determining legal liability or identifying major fault factors, not trying to understand. Anyone who problematize in order to better understand can easily be accused of relativising or trivialising serious events.

However, there is another reason that complex explanations are often discarded. Humans tend to adopt explanatory models that avoid personal responsibility and relieve any sense of guilt. The tendency to externalise blame is well-documented in attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), perhaps best illustrated by the self-serving bias; when I pass it is because I studied hard, but if I fail there must be something wrong with the test! When faced with unethical behaviour it is often convenient to blame a few bad apples or a specific toxic subculture, because it relieves us from any guilt or association. Accepting complexity often means embracing that we could, somehow, have been implicitly responsible (turning a blind eye, normalising through silence, failure to intervene, acceptance of an unhealthy culture, knowledge of bad training practices…) or accept the fact that we could have acted in the same way under similar circumstances.

Developing well-thought-out professional ethics is not possible if you see yourself as infallible or judge case studies from a moral pedestal. Indeed, complexity is difficult and is made even more difficult because we sometimes have to face our own shortcomings. The statement "I would never do that" must be replaced with the question "under what circumstances could I have acted similarly"?

Cross-sectional studies and snapshots

Because of this aforementioned complexity, case studies and case methodology are frequently used in the teaching of military ethics. Using these has several advantages. First, they are useful in highlighting complexity for students who seek the 'correct' solution. Second, they also foster the ability to translate theory into real-world scenarios and to understand how theoretical models (normative ethical theories, laws, principles) might apply to a case (Kaurin, 2014, p. 109). The complexity of ethical decision-making often becomes apparent when normative ethical theories are placed within a contextual framework and set against pragmatic reality. Third, and perhaps most important, case methodology also facilitates personal reflection, enabling identification with individuals in the example and encouraging contemplation of one's own likely actions. Such studies are often commendable in describing how different individuals' perspectives, shortcomings, or capacity for personal courage influenced the outcome of the situation.

Case studies are also valuable for educational purposes, as they can be taken to their extremes to illustrate ethical dilemmas and limitations of normative ethics. For example, Philippa Foot's classic dilemma *The Trolley Case* (Thomson, 1976) serves as an illustration that highlights a clash between deontological and utilitarian thinking: if I pull the lever, the runaway train will be diverted onto the side track and only one person will die, but if I refrain, it will continue straight ahead and five people will die. The example underscores the clash between normative ethical theories: deontological ethics, in which acts of killing are wrong, and utilitarianism, in which consequences are significant, and I sacrifice one person to save five. According to utilitarianism, the 'right' choice is to sacrifice one to save five, but according to deontological ethics, the 'right' choice is to refrain, because the act of killing is wrong. By varying details in the given case, we can become aware of which of the two modes of thought becomes more prominent in our decisions, depending

on context. Similarly, case studies in purely military contexts can highlight collisions where two valid arguments are set against each other, prompting students to reflect on which framework is most appropriate to rely upon in a given type of situation. In sum, case studies are a common method in the teaching of military ethics, and they offer many advantages.

One 'good' example in the teaching of military ethics is the My Lai massacre – the mass killing of hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians, primarily women, children, and elderly people – in Vietnam on March 16, 1968. It is often used as a case study because of its complexity and range (e.g., Kaurin, 2014; Toner, 2000). The event involved deeply immoral and inexcusable (although theoretically explainable) acts and outright war crimes, where American soldiers executed unarmed civilians. But it also included several moral acts of great personal courage in which individuals defied their compatriots, exposed themselves to physical danger, and paid a significant social price to halt the massacre.

However, there is one major drawback that is often overlooked. Just like humans tend to gravitate towards answers, case studies and case methodology tend to view ethical dilemmas and moral choices as a scientific cross-sectional study taking place at a given moment or over a very short time span. They seldom take into account the decisions and choices that led to the position presented.

Ethical Choices, Risk Factors, and Protective Factors

In reality, few decisions occur in as much isolation as case studies tend to present them, even when they are rich in detail. Every dilemma we face will, to varying degrees, be shaped by the decisions we have made beforehand – the ethical choices we have made along the way – or, worse still, the decisions we should have made. Often, the impossible decisions depicted in case studies are the consequence of earlier decisions we either made, or omitted. Individuals have chosen a path that eventually led to a moral dead end. Above all, there will invariably be factors preceding an event that have influenced its outcome to varying extents.

A more successful method can be to identify the factors that have most influenced the course of events and the decision points that have led to a specific incident or moment in time. Through this, one can often discern patterns or tendencies. The great advantage of this approach is that anything identifiable as a risk factor can also serve as a protective factor. For example, poor group cohesion or a culture of silence may be a risk factor for poor decision-making. Likewise, lacking the moral courage to speak in opposition to a risky policy early on in a process can lead to moral dead ends later on. Conversely, strong cohesion and openness within the group can be a clear protective factor, enabling both the group and its leader to perform better in most respects or encouraging the moral courage to speak in opposition when needed.

Implementing such a longitudinal perspective also connects directly to virtue ethics (Hursthouse, 1999), which emphasises the character of the moral agent and where virtues like courage, integrity, justice and temperance are emphasised for enabling individuals to make moral decisions. This makes it highly relevant for professions like the military, with the strong identity and ethos often required to handle uncertainty and ambiguity (Christoffersen & Tunek, 2007). What makes this normative theory more relevant for this kind of approach is that is inherently developmental and focuses on cultivating stable dispositions and asking what kind of individual you want to be. While virtue ethics can provide an important

framework, it is not without limitations. Virtues like courage and integrity are often difficult to define in the abstract and become intelligible only within a specific context. Another limitation is that it is difficult to describe exactly how such virtues are formed and sustained.

The longitudinal approach in the present article can help overcome these limitations by demonstrating how virtues can be eroded or cultivated over time. In this way, virtues can be seen not only as abstract traits but as an observable outcome of previous behaviour. For example, the moral courage to speak in opposition is not best understood as a timeless quality but as something that can be acquired and strengthened through small corrective actions early on. This reinforces individual virtues, a culture of open communication within the unit, and the development of good behaviour in training contexts. On the other hand, the absence of such interventions can lead to a gradual erosion of both moral character but also the window of possibility for potential actions, eventually leading to the moral dead ends described above. Accordingly, the present model can provide a link between the normative ideals of virtue ethics and the empirical process where such virtues are formed and expressed.

In the following, we will examine a number of different factors that often influence the extent to which an individual is able to make ethical decisions on the battlefield. Afterwards, we will compile them on a timeline to visualise how different factors may interact and lead to impossible situations – moral dead ends – and the paths by which they could have possibly been avoided.

Selection and recruitment

Arguably the most fundamental risk and protective factor for ethical decision-making is the initial selection of personnel and ensuring that the right individuals are placed in the right positions. This process ensures that those who will later be required to make sound decisions have the capacity to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills from demanding military training (and not merely survive it), to function effectively within a social context and contribute to a positive culture, and to understand and adapt to complex situations.

General cognitive ability is the clearest predictor of how well an individual will absorb demanding training and perform in an occupational setting, particularly in more complex professional categories (Gottfredson, 1997). This often appears counter-intuitive to many ("How clever do you have to be to pull a trigger?"). However, not everyone possesses the capacity to acquire knowledge and skills in the manner required by military training. A large study in the United States Air Force showed that, among individuals in the highest selection category, 95% successfully completed a demanding training course, whereas only 20% from the lowest category achieved a passing result (Matarazzo, 1972). Similarly, general cognitive ability is the factor that most clearly determines whether an individual will perform well in demanding military roles (McHenry et al., 1990). Annell et al. (2014) demonstrated that cognitive ability is a central predictor of both job performance and retention in uniformed professions. Motivation and experience can always compensate to some extent, but not nearly as much as is often assumed. Schmidt et al. (1988) showed that even extended occupational experience in military professions (five years) could not eliminate differences in overall job performance between soldiers from higher and lower selection groups.

Selecting the best candidates may seem self-evident. However, military organisations frequently face the dual challenge of identifying the most suitable individuals while also meeting high recruitment volumes. The latter often comes at the cost of lowered standards and reduced requirement profiles. While this is sometimes unavoidable, it must be recognised that lowered standards have often been the foundation for catastrophically poor performance on the battlefield (Gregory, 2015). In sum, low standards constitute a risk factor for poor ethical decision-making, whereas maintaining or raising standards serves as a protective factor enabling sound decision-making.

Training

The second factor enabling individuals to perform well within an ethical framework is the training they receive. Military training is not merely about getting through a demanding course; it is about acquiring, in the best possible way, the knowledge and skills required for the work one is expected to perform, including making difficult decisions. Military competence is far more than simply pulling a trigger; it is, to a large extent, about functioning and performing effectively in demanding environments.

At the most basic level, training provides the knowledge and skills that individuals will need to navigate situations they encounter. On a social level, it contributes to building unit cohesion and fostering a collective identity. When individuals feel a strong collective identity, they are more inclined to adopt the organisation's ethical framework as their own, and are therefore more likely to make decisions aligned with professional ethics (Tajfel et al., 1979). On a broader level, military training also develops resilience and the capacity to remain calm and maintain situational awareness amidst complexity in extreme situations – something that is a prerequisite for sound decision-making. Conversely, leaders with poor cognitive and emotional control may harm themselves or others by making ineffective decisions or by failing to make decisions at all (Kolditz, 2007a, 2007b).

In many cases where individuals have overstepped ethical boundaries, they have often had either too brief a period of training or their training lacked key components. For example, the investigation into the abuses at Abu Ghraib revealed that the guards had received no training in handling prisoners (detention/internee operations) and inadequate training in the Geneva Conventions' requirements for the treatment of prisoners of war (Taguba, 2004). Naturally, it is more difficult to manage challenging situations involving prisoners of war when one has inadequate – or worse, no – training in how to handle them correctly. In contrast, conflicts such as the Falklands War are often cited as textbook examples of orderly warfare conducted in accordance with the rules of international humanitarian law (exceptions exist, there are always occasional transgressions in the heat of battle) precisely because they involved elite units with lengthy training periods (Jennings & Weale, 1996).

In sum, training serves as a protective factor for ethical decision-making because it consolidates the instrumental knowledge that individuals must master, teaches them how to operate and maintain awareness in extreme environments, and, above all, instils in them a strong sense of collective identity and professionalism, which are often cornerstones in any professional ethic.

Organisational culture

All individual decisions take place within a social context. In military units, social structures characterised by high cohesion are discussed through concepts such as *unit spirit* or *core values*. The very first sentence in the Swedish Armed Forces' Core Values (Försvarsmakten, 2017) emphasises that "[a] military profession possesses expertise in the use of military force under legal and political control" (p. 11, author's translation); something that establishes a central link between the profession and the tasks it is expected to accomplish. A central element of all professions is that they possess a strong professional ethic – an *ethos* – governing conduct. Such an ethos sets norms and ethical frameworks that individuals are expected to follow (Kaurin, 2014).

The military profession frequently operates in the delicate balance between applying the maximum necessary military force to accomplish the mission and the morality of avoiding greater harm than necessary. This is often encapsulated in the concept of *warrior culture*. A warrior culture produces disciplined soldiers in mental balance but also fosters trust in the actions of others (Bovet, 2013).

In its basic form, group cohesion can have both positive and negative effects. Safety and trust in the group have long been argued to be central motivating factors that enable the soldier to continue fighting, even in seemingly hopeless situations (Shils & Janowitz, 1948). But they have also been highlighted as factors that induce conformity and create a reluctance to confront other members of the group (Asch, 1951).

Consequently, the organisational culture of the group becomes central. A strong warrior ethos does not imply the conformity of always submitting to the group's decisions; rather, it includes the obligation to correct others when someone oversteps boundaries and violates the code of conduct. Put plainly, soldiers should be capable of applying uncompromising violence against an opponent, yet possess the professionalism to refrain when it no longer serves a military purpose. They must, above all, have the moral courage to confront others who overstep the line, even if this sometimes entails a social cost. In regard to a longitudinal mindset, small early corrections can often prevent bigger problems later on.

Time in combat—brutalisation and normalisation

A central factor often overlooked in military contexts is the temporal dimension and how long soldiers are exposed to extreme conditions. In cases where abuses or outright war crimes have occurred, combat fatigue accompanied by emotional exhaustion has often been a contributing factor. Perpetrating, witnessing, or failing to prevent acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs is often described as moral injury and have been shown to be deleterious over the long-term (Litz et al., 2009). Despite this, longitudinal effects are relatively absent in ethical case studies.

There is no definitive figure for how long a human being can function effectively on the battlefield. A classic visualisation is Swank and Marchand's (1946) model of combat fatigue, which suggests that a soldier's maximum mental endurance is 60 days of sustained combat. Another, more comprehensive study by Beebe and Appel (1958) indicates 80–90 days. Both, of course, note that this period can vary according to a number of factors, not least the intensity of combat. Nevertheless, they are relatively consistent in their conclusions about how time in combat affects human beings. A certain minimum time in a given context is required for a soldier

to function optimally. In plain terms, soldiers must overcome their baptism by fire and feel secure in the combat environment before they can operate at their best. This includes making well-founded decisions.

However, both studies also agree that beyond a certain point, emotional exhaustion begins to set in, increasing risk-taking behaviour and the likelihood of breakdowns. This is also accompanied by a reduced sensitivity to one's own and others' suffering, which diminishes the salience of ethical frameworks and increases the likelihood of immoral conduct. Our ethical convictions remain, but exhaustion determines the extent to which we possess the mental strength to apply them in a given situation.

The temporal dimension and sequential decision-making

The temporal dimension also allow decisions to be viewed along a timeline in combination with one another. The decisions individuals make will lead to an outcome which, in turn, affects the situation and thereby the decisions they will face further ahead. If decisions symbolise major courses of action, this will also increase the likelihood of encountering certain types of consequences and subsequent decisions later on, while entirely excluding other alternatives.

In military terms, the concept of decision points is often used. Making decisions is a natural task for military commanders and is often central to the direction of an operation. These are deliberate choices frequently made with incomplete information, where opportunities are weighed against risks. The decisions we make, including those we ought to have made, therefore form points along the timeline that symbolise both physical and ethical courses of action.

Military ethics encompasses not only the effects of the decisions we make, but also the consequences of what we ought to have done but did not. Failure to act or indecisive action can often be regarded as a decision in and of itself if the consequences are the same. For example, unhealthy group norms may become further entrenched if they are not addressed, and if someone observes but does not correct unethical conduct, it may easily be interpreted as acceptance. This can be described as signing a 'silent contract' between the perpetrator and the person who should have intervened but did not, since they have now both erred in different ways.

Inaction can also be seen at higher levels and have been illustrated in other conflicts. For example, note the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) during the genocide of 1994. Canadian commander Roméo Dallaire received repeated intelligence reports indicating that mass killings were being planned and requested permission to seize weapons caches and take preventive measures (Dallaire & Beardsley, 2004). However, his requests were denied by UN headquarters because of the narrowly defined mandate, limiting actions that should have been taken.

Returning to the case studies often used in the teaching of military ethics; if we mark the discussed factors as decision points on a timeline it is often possible to identify how individuals have ended up in 'moral dead ends' as a consequence of such courses of action. Moral dead ends occur when a series of decisions has led people down less-productive paths that ultimately confront them with an impossible choice.

A moral dead end can be defined as a decision-making situation where a sequence of preceding choices, factors and constraints has made all available

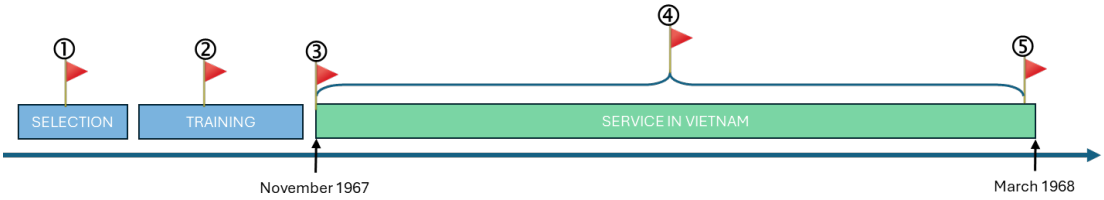
courses of action ethically unacceptable. Such situations emerge not from a single poor choice, but from a chain of previous actions or omissions that gradually eliminate morally viable alternatives. A moral dead end thus represents the culmination of path-dependent ethical erosion, where the individual or unit eventually is confronted with a dilemma that has no morally acceptable outcome.

Consequently, it will also be possible to identify possible decision points for future similar cases, where a more informed decision could offer a better choice of path.

Ethical risk factors on a timeline

The way in which these combined risk and protective factors may interact is most easily illustrated visually, which often makes it easier to trace the path leading up to an event. For this purpose, we will use the previously mentioned example of the My Lai massacre. Few accounts of the incident include its background. However, the history is readily available for those who go looking. In the example, the 23rd Infantry Division assembled in the area of operations and was engaged in prolonged periods of operations leading up to the massacre in March 1968, during a phase where both selection and training was not prioritised (Gregory, 2015). Considering the history of the case, several contributing factors can be identified.

Figure 1 A visual timeline with the factors discussed. The figure provides an example and can be developed or adapted as needed.



1. **Selection**: Lowered entry requirements for both officers and enlisted personnel.
2. **Training**: Short duration. Lieutenant William Calley, for example, had only just over one year of total military experience.
3. **Organisational Culture**: The unit had been reactivated in Vietnam and consisted of various sub-units without a unified organisational culture.
4. **Time Factor**: The company had suffered mine casualties but had never been engaged in direct combat with the enemy (frustration).
5. **Other**: Two days before the incident, a popular sergeant had been killed by a mine (desire for revenge).

1. The United States Army had, at the time, lowered its entry requirements for both officers and enlisted personnel.
2. Similarly, the duration of entry-level training had been reduced. Lieutenant William Calley, who was later convicted, had served for only just over a year in total. This included basic training, officer training, and rotation training combined, thus creating two significant red flags early on the timeline.
3. At the organisational level, the unit had been assembled as an ad hoc formation composed of both existing and entirely new sub-units, without a unified organisational culture.
4. A temporal factor was added to this in which the unit had worked hard and sustained losses but had never come into direct combat with the enemy, something which had fostered frustration. This factor could easily be further subdivided into subordinate events or decisions to keep the unit in active operations, or the indecision to withdraw it at crucial points where a 'fresh' unit could have taken over operations.
5. Adding to this, the unit lost its popular sergeant, George Cox, only two days before the massacre. This created both a strong desire for revenge within the

unit and left it with diminished leadership due to the loss of an experienced non-commissioned officer.

A longitudinal timeline with marked decision points naturally provides no definitive answers. However, it can serve as a better basis for discussion to understand the complexity of how individuals or units sometimes end up in moral dead ends. Each red flag on its own did not cause a poor outcome, but together they interacted to produce a catastrophe. Understanding how these risk factors may interact is as important in military ethics as studying individual decision points. Using the chosen method, factors could be identified and added almost indefinitely. The key is, of course, to add factors that could offer some explanatory value and eliminate those who do not.

Methodologically, this approach closely resembles root cause analysis in that one works progressively backwards to identify the root cause of an event. A difference, however, is that the type of ethical case studies discussed here rarely have a single root cause; rather, all identified causes have interacted and could, individually, have constituted equally strong contributing factors.

Conclusion

Ethical decision-making in military contexts cannot be reduced to isolated snapshots or individual failings. Instead, it must be approached as a longitudinal process shaped by cumulative factors that contribute to and shape the range of available moral options. This perspective reveals how seemingly independent factors such as recruitment standards, training quality, organisational culture, and time in combat interact over time, influencing the range of ethical options available at any given moment.

The longitudinal approach illustrates that breakdowns in ethical decision-making do not emerge from a single factor or decision but from a long chain of actions (or inactions) that progressively narrow the ethically available options until units and individuals find themselves in moral dead ends. However, it also shows the importance of recognising patterns of influence and anticipating how early decisions may constrain or enable future ethical choices.

This approach to ethics highlights two main insights. First, ethical resilience depends on early action and often seemingly minor choices. Second, professional military education should benefit from moving beyond viewing case studies as snapshots of static events and instead integrating longitudinal analyses and progressions into their scenarios. This will enable leaders to recognise how trajectories made up from critical decision points shape their future alternatives.

Overall, combining normative ethical theory with psychological and organisational insights can help individuals navigate the complex and cumulative pressures of operational environments. Preparing leaders for future challenges means not only teaching them what is right but equipping them to see how the decisions they make today shape both themselves as individuals and the ethical possibilities of tomorrow.

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