

Teaching military ethics as resilience – the case of the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy

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A longitudinal perspective of military ethics highlights how a range of factors—from recruitment and selection to the cultivation of a healthy military culture—play a crucial role in building the resilience necessary to reduce the risk of moral failure in military contexts.

One question that such a perspective brings to the surface is: how should military education, spanning over a relatively short period of time, be designed to ensure that military commanders meet the ethical standards expected of them? Where should one start?

The longitudinal perspective offers an opportunity to view traditional ethics education like case studies as one of several ways to educate resilient military commanders. Where case studies traditionally are used for training in ethically sound decision-making at the point of action, we must also consider influencing factors preceding and reaching beyond the moment of decision when designing education programs. We use case studies at different levels in military education, and when given time to discover moral complexity and consider possible choices of action from different ethical perspectives cadets seem to become ethically more aware, thereby strengthening their moral competence (Wortel and Bosch, 2011)—in the moment. As important as this kind of training is, there is a growing awareness that ethical education and training must be integrated into military education if the aim is largely to influence behavior in real life. Looking to resilience training, which has moved from individual resilience training programs to recognizing the role of leadership and group cohesion (Phelps et al. 2024), combining insights from research on ethics training and resilience could be a place to start.

The cadet who can reflect eloquently on what is morally at stake in a case study and make sound judgments that Aristotle would be proud of, may at the same time not raise her hand to protest against unacceptable conduct or sexist language in a plenary session where the transgression is pretty clear although conveyed as a joke. Why?

Before attempting to answer the ‘why’, consider the concrete example of how we integrate ethics education in the Norwegian Defense University College generally, and at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy (RoNAF Academy) in particular.

Ethics is mentioned in every description of learning objectives throughout the three years of officers training. In practice this means some lessons in military ethics in courses dedicated to leadership and air power. The lessons sometimes include working with cases, often historical ones, or we work with real life situations like the students' learning environment. This is the basic education they get in military ethics that is explicitly expressed as ethics lessons in the curriculum. In addition, the cadets at the RoNAF Academy can choose an elective course in ethics that runs for 9 weeks in the second year. Although just a few cadets take this course, the course itself represents an arena for developing education in ethics related to leadership in a military context. The main aim is to develop and strengthen their personal integrity and their professional identity as future military leaders in a value-based defense. A third arena where ethics is integrated to a certain extent is exercises. The cadets are exposed to many situations under stress that they must handle, often comprising moral dilemmas. Theory and practice are always followed by reflective practice, individually, in groups and in plenary sessions, to make sense of it all and ensure learning.

As part of the leadership education, the question is how to make the connection to ethics clear not only when discussing leadership in the air force, but making it clear in their everyday life at the academy: your response to the ethical standards required from an officer is not something you develop on graduation day. It started yesterday when you decided upon an education in military leadership, or even before that. Military ethics comes as a prolongment of the foundational ethical questions cadets navigate every day. We as teachers cannot teach ethics from a moral pedestal, we ourselves need to be role models. And the cadets must become aware of who they are and how they can live up to their role during those three years.

Thinking about ethics education in terms of embodied knowledge that started before the officers' training is perhaps a useful entrance to understanding the *Bildung* of an officer, that is, how cognitive and practical knowledge is mastered and internalized (Wortel and Bosch 2011). Ethics as embodied knowledge goes a step further from case-based military ethics education. Therefore, we also engage the cadets in using and learning from their own life experience. To establish this personal starting point for learning we must cultivate a just culture, a learning culture that builds on vulnerability trust and that rewards courage and willingness to speak openly about concerns and mistakes (Moldjord 2023). In view of resilient training's emphasis on group factors like leadership and team cohesion (Phelps et al. 2024), cadets are introduced to such a just culture in teams of eight or nine under supervision from the very beginning. This is one of several ways the cadets work to develop their own skills needed to live by and stand up for important values and ethical standards. In such team building, cadets for instance learn what personal and moral courage is by experience in a safe environment. Later they will be part of a new team, maybe even an international one, with new cultural challenges. The hope is that they will have become resilient enough to contribute actively to a sound culture, which lowers the risk of moral failure when they start serving in the RoNAF units.

Three years at the academy is a limited period from a longitudinal perspective. The more important is the question of how we integrate military ethics into the *Bildung* of future military leaders. Evidence of moral failure by military teams (they always have a leader), like the Australian Special Forces that executed civilian

Afghans, shows that it is not necessarily hours of classroom ethics that is required. Apparently, they had advanced ethical training and high standards beforehand. What is wanted is the awareness that as human beings we depend on each other to the extent that raising a hand to protest in a plenary session, or worse, in a team with a culture of silence amid chaos, is not only a question of responding to well-known ethical standards and core values within the organization. It is a question of how we work with our vulnerabilities to become more resilient in stressful situations.

There is a connection between ethics education, leadership and resilience (Phelps et al., 2024). The realm of ethics was never an add-on to life in general or to military education and practice. Ethics is about how to live a good life in general, and in professional military ethics it is a foundation and integrated part of becoming and being a military leader. It is of course not sufficient to point out, maybe provokingly, that ethics was never an add-on to military training, as if it is taken for granted that military *Bildung* itself is a guarantee for ethically founded behavior in specific situations. Ethics needs to be articulated in leadership training as an important step to becoming morally competent, and to strengthen moral competence ethics needs to be an integrated part of leadership and resilience training in the education of military leaders. Then there may be a better chance of developing ethical leadership that works beyond the safe zone of the academy.

Now back to the ‘why’. From a longitudinal perspective, entering the armed forces, one is first a human being, then a soldier and military commander. For this reason, we must focus on the whole person, to allow her to grow into the resilient military commander who is willing to raise her hand when needed. The reason why she would not raise her hand when she finds herself and her team in a morally complex situation may be the risk of being excluded, which in certain situations means being as good as non-existent. She therefore might be prone to take the seemingly lesser risk of becoming a traumatized soldier. She may also become accustomed to unacceptable behavior. Perhaps, however, the risk of becoming accustomed is lower if she has learned how a learning culture can prevent moral failure by allowing concerns to be articulated and by encouraging cadets to care about each other’s well-being and conduct. Working on the learning culture in education and in the organization nurtures the courage to speak up, regardless of the personal risk.

In conclusion, the longitudinal perspective on military ethics should leave us thinking differently about what military ethics education is about and start reflecting on how everything we do in the education of military personnel and military leaders has ethical sides to it—and work with that.

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