Image used with the permission of Mr. Jeff Bacon.

A Leadership Problem

Commander Jorge Garcia
United States Navy

In December 2010, the lead vehicle in a convoy traveling from Umm-Qasr to Basra, Iraq was struck by a roadside explosive. A half-inch piece of shrapnel cut into the exposed gunner's neck. He fell inside the vehicle, stunned. In accordance with their training, the men assessed the damages, found them non-disabling, and pressed on. The "down" gunner was replaced, treated, and delivered to the medical tent in Basra some 20 minutes later.

This was my unit. Within three days, I was directed to write a Meritorious Advancement nomination for the man whose total actions consisted of falling and being the compliant recipient of a bandage to the neck. I made the gunner *sound* like an impressive superior performer. On closer scrutiny, as it contained no lies and the gunner had performed no actions, alert readers would note that the nomination – all three pages of it – said nothing. Such deliberate gaseous writing (and thinking) is pervasive – and often demanded – throughout the Navy, presenting a serious ethical concern that is crippling its leadership.

A great Commanding Officer once attempted to explain to a clutch of sleepy junior officers (of which I was one) that we are professional managers of the application of violence. As such, a firm grasp and sound application of ethics is more important to us than our non-death dealing civilian counterparts. If anyone needs to be well versed on the intrinsic value of human life, it is we, who may give the order, or pull the trigger, to end it. But the central question of ethics is not "when is it right to

kill?" It is "what is true?" Our approach to *that* question will influence our navigation of all higher ethical conundrums.

Unfortunately, naval leaders often answer that question with "never mind." I do not mean that we routinely lie. Lying has been recognized to be unethical for millennia and is as habitually avoided as a crime scene marked with red tape. The malady in question lacks such a universally recognizable face. But at least one author that I know of has identified and denounced this malady. In a tiny book I picked up four years ago, titled *On Bullshit*, philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt of Princeton argues that "bullshit" is distinct from – and ethically murkier than – lying. In contrast with a liar who holds truth dear as the very thing withheld, a bullshitter's goal is to dazzle his audience with the size and sound of his statements; their truth is inconsequential. Too many Navy fitness reports and award nominations are characterized this way – they say nothing, impressively: This is bad.

If we are to deserve the trust of the men and women we lead and the people we defend, the question of "what is true?" ought to inform everything we do. Answer this question incorrectly and we begin our slide down the slippery slope to a Pat Tillman event. But here is the present state of affairs: Recognition and promotion are concerned with the use (not the truth) of standard phrases, and the presence (not the content) of key documents. This (compounded possibly by a weak liberal arts education) has led to an environment where the phenomenon described by Prof. Frankfurt has become a way of life. We naval leaders have become professional bullshitters.