Cannibals, Gun-deckers, and Good Idea Fairies: Structural Incentives to Deceive in the Military

A recent study reported that US Army officers think of themselves as being persons of integrity while also reporting systematic dishonesty in the execution of their professional duties.[[1]](#footnote-1) The authors conclude that the structure of the modern US Army tacitly encourages and effectively necessitates falsifications of some reports, non-compliance with some training requirements, and exaggerations of readiness postures. A less comprehensive set of interviews I conducted with US Navy officers reveals the same problems as well as some forms of deception peculiar to the Naval Service. To be clear, these problems are not universal, with different warfare communities apparently having more rule-compliant cultures (or more generous funding streams) than others and different commands enjoying better or worse ethical cultures as a consequence of their leadership.

The behavioral vectors of compulsion and compliance characterizing a hierarchical organization like the military creates morally hazardous conditions for organization members. Personnel expect their subordinates to comply with directives without negotiation or resistance while subordinates know they are professionally, if not legally, bound to obey their lawful orders. The larger the organization and “steeper” the hierarchy, the greater the chance that high-echelon order-givers will be ignorant of the facts on the ground as well as the existing workload for subordinates (who may be getting demand signals from several layers of management). By contrast, in an egalitarian or less hierarchical organization, bad ideas or unreasonable demands can be more readily challenged, vetted, and re-formulated amongst peers.

Current exigencies in the US military related to funding and the promotion process mean this potential for moral hazards is too often realized. Officers routinely report that there is insufficient time to perform mandated trainings and there is insufficient funding to perform necessary maintenance of materiél. Added to this structural problem created by a mismatch between the demands placed on the military by politicians and the relative dearth of funding politicians provide is a perverse incentive structure for personnel promotion. Many commands have a zero defect mentality: officers are expected to meet 100% of the objectives set for them by superiors. Concurrently, promotion boards are increasingly rigorous, looking for any blemish to exclude one highly qualified candidate from another. Given that higher echelon officers typically depend on computerized reports rather than on-site inspections to judge compliance, harried subordinates might falsify, exaggerate, and fudge records of compliance with a reasonable hope of successful deception. There may be a further temptation to do these things because of their apparent triviality. There is a sense in some commands, at least with respect to falsifying certain reports or short-changing certain requirements, that “everyone is doing it and everyone *knows* everyone is doing it.” It is like a community of worshippers who have lost faith and yet persist in their mantras. Finally, it is noted by the personnel in certain commands that the service members who truthfully report their failure to meet (unreasonable) demand signals are reprimanded and/or fail to promote.

When personnel are told that all trainings and safety checks are mandatory but there is not enough time or manning to accomplish them, even conscientious personnel will engage in a kind of triage to determine which duties are truly important. Common sense and bureaucracy are age-old enemies; a well-designed system will permit professionals to engage in a certain amount of discretion while still deferring to a common set of rules and experience-based hierarchy. Yet an obvious danger lies in group members relying on their common sense rather than rules. As one retired commander put it to me “I think I’m smart enough to know which requirements are really important, yet I expect *my* subordinates to follow my instructions with 100% fidelity. The problem is *everyone thinks this way* (and not everyone is as smart as me).” Since command expects 100% compliance, leaders are then put in the position of ordering subordinates to do what is actually important while at the same time doctoring reports to show full compliance. This doctoring can range from “pencil-whipping” training requirements (falsely indicating in writing that everyone in the command completed a training), to cannibalizing equipment, to “gun-decking,” (falsely indicating in logs that required maintenance is complete).

A 2002 US Army War College showed that Army units had 297 days of annual mandatory training to pack into 256 available training days.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given this impossible math, individuals and units throughout the military ignore; rush through; or pencil-whip trainings that seem unimportant. Stultifying, didactic powerpoint-based trainings on subjects seemingly collateral to one’s primary mission like sexual harassment, proper record keeping, and recreational safety are prime candidates for pencil-whipping. As a Department of the Navy civilian employee, I can personally attest to clicking as fast as possible through some computer-based trainings that have nothing to do with my job as a professor (safe load-carrying postures? wilderness survival training?). I feel the same frustration that officers report to me: some higher power decrees that I must find a spot in my already overloaded schedule to urgently complete a non-urgent and extraneous training probably assigned in a wholesale, non-reflective fashion by a person selecting the “all Naval employees” tab on a dropdown menu in order to inoculate the government against lawsuits or bad press. Thus, this ethics professor can attest to participating in a deceitful community practice in which non-pedagogues create pedagogically inadequate trainings to placate a demand signal or to create a talking point in the future regarding comprehensive training without regard to existing workloads and in abdication of managerial responsibility to prioritize subordinates’ tasks, thus nearly ensuring that compliance will be inadequate. I am part of the problem. Also, in the wilderness, remove the hind legs of crickets before consuming them raw or cooked.

More serious is the widespread practice of cannibalization in some sectors of the Navy. Whereas readiness can be faked or fudged on computerized readiness reports—exaggerating the number of “green” or “yellow” systems on superiors’ computerized dashboards—more aggressive actions are required to inflate readiness postures when it comes to physical inspections. The US Congress has for some time mandated comprehensive inspections of Fleet readiness every five years in a process called INSURV. Technicians from defense contractors inspect Navy equipment to ensure that every widget and valve is set according to blueprint specifications. The difficulty is that post-Cold War defense department budget cuts have reduced the availability of spare parts and the number of available personnel to the point that several officers told me that no ship has every piece of equipment nor the manning it is supposed to have. So officers play a shell game during INSURV inspections, often with the full knowledge and coordination of port commanders, borrowing needed equipment from various ships to temporarily put on the ship being inspected. Officers tell me that the contractors know what is going on, as does Navy leadership; it is unclear if some Congressmen know as well. A field grade officer told me he served under a captain who told his Commodore he was going to have his crew do their best, but show inspectors the ship’s shortcomings without any cannibalization, and the Commodore in turn told him to “pound sand” and to engage in cannibalization.

The most dangerous form of deception is gun-decking, including falsifying reports to indicate non-functioning pieces of equipment are operational or that unfulfilled maintenance requirements have been fulfilled. An infamous case of the gun-decking in the Naval Service involved a Marine air wing’s gun-decking of maintenance logs of MV-22 Osprey aircraft, to make a sufficient number of the crash-prone vehicles appear operational ahead of a Congressional funding vote.[[3]](#footnote-3) In a less well-reported case, a cruiser could not deploy to conduct humanitarian assistance in its area of operations following a hurricane, because department heads had gun-decked maintenance logs to report that all five divisions on the ship were “green.” Their falsifications were only called out when the ship was actually called on to perform a mission.

The challenging environment occasioned by limited time and budgets can be exacerbated by toxic leaders and “good idea fairies.” The toxic leader “leads through fear.” He or she cannot be told bad news without losing composure and attacking the messenger. Cowed subordinates learn it is better to give the skipper whatever he or she wants, regardless of whether it is true. For example, a commodore read the riot act to his subordinate admirals and captains over the fact that a balky new communications systems was non-functional on several aircraft in his fleet. During the next meeting, every subordinate reported to the commodore that the system on their crafts were “green” despite the fact that on some craft this meant that communications could be maintained for only four minutes. In another case, an admiral saw first-hand how department heads of an amphibious assault ship had been systematically falsifying readiness reports to inflate the number of “yellow” aircraft. The admiral saw what the captain of the ship did not: fist-sized rust holes in some craft and other evidence that the crew had been lying to the captain about the number of non-operational craft out of fear of his temper.

The tyrant is one type of bad officer. Another source of stress for subordinates is the “good idea fairy.” One field grade officer told me “the most dangerous person in the military is an O-6 without a staff.” A senior officer in a new billet has a short time to make an impact given that his or her rotation may only be two years. New initiatives may be directly assigned to junior officers who already have a full suite of duties or merely suggested to juniors in the *optimistic impersonal*: “wouldn’t it be *great* if someone did X?” Junior officers are well familiar with the sensation of being “voluntold” to do something: being recruited for an ostensibly optional endeavor that is not really optional.

What is frustrating with all these scenarios, is that everyone involved seems to know that games are being played. The entities sending training and maintenance requirements downrange know that subordinates do not have the time and funding to accomplish these tasks and so will half-heartedly comply with them, if at all. Order-givers can hardly trust their dashboards full of green lights. Some training requirements themselves seem like half-hearted efforts to react to some scandal or placate a member of Congress without any attention paid to the training’s efficacy or utility. Obviously, there is a real concern for safety when it comes to gun-decking and cannibalization. There is also a subtle degradation of ethical culture when even good people feel they need to systematically falsify, fudge, and exaggerate in order to make the system work properly. There is the risk that people accustomed to making common sense exceptions to create good outcomes start making lazy or corrupt exceptions to facilitate bad outcomes. Further, such a corrosive environment risks creating cynicism about the moral universe. Is all life just a game? Do you have to put your thumb on the scale in every instance? Polls consistently show that many Americans see the military as a kind of school of virtue, especially for young people. Something has to change in order to fully live up to this ideal.

1. Wong, Leonard, Author, Stephen J Gerras, U.S. Strategic Studies Institute Army War College, and U.S.. Press Army War College. Lying to ourselves: dishonesty in the Army profession. 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leonard Wong, *Stifling Innovation: Developing Tomorrow’s Leaders Today*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. LtCol Gary Slyman (USMC), Patricia Jacubec, Jonathon Cox, “Falsification of the MV-22 Readiness Records,” in CAPT Rick Rubel (USN-Ret.) and George Lucas, Case Studies for Ethics for Military Leaders, 5th ed., (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 141-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)