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Business School Admission Essay

After fighting for years to be promoted to the position of tank company executive officer, I believed that transitioning into the role would be relatively easy. I could not have been more mistaken. As soon as the paperwork settled and I donned my new uniform, I encountered an ethical dilemma that cast all of my previous training into doubt.

The officer I replaced had been less than forthcoming in his maintenance reports to the company and battalion commanders. The officer had fabricated data on the number of maintenance problems in order to look better in the eyes of his superiors. This presented me with a tricky problem. Army command needs an accurate count of battle-ready tanks in case of deployment. Companies send weekly reports on the maintenance status of their tanks to their battalion, and this data is passed on to the highest levels of army command. The army aims for ninety percent readiness in case of war.

The outgoing officer's dishonesty was inconsistent with my (and his) military training; officers trained at the United States Military Academy take an oath from the first day of matriculation to maintain a strict standard of integrity. The cadet creed states that, "a cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do." I internalized this creed at the academy, and I became unyielding in my forthrightness. I could not overlook my fellow officer's behavior, but was it right for me to report him?

The army is built on trust because soldiers must be able to rely on each other if they find themselves in combat. A soldier must trust the soldiers around him, and he must be willing to give his life to protect them. If I reported the dishonest commander, I would be compromising this trust and would lose face among my peers. An unspoken rule among officers forbids one from voluntarily surrendering another unless his negligence has led to the injury or death of a soldier. The outgoing executive officer was well liked, and I risked becoming unpopular with my men if I reported his infraction. Fudging numbers on maintenance reports was not uncommon, and I faced considerable pressure to overlook the impropriety.

I had two options: I could send an honest report exposing the preceding officer's fraudulent reporting, or I could falsify reports myself, thus protecting his career. Neither option was palatable.

To buy more time, I convinced the company commander to give me an additional week before submitting my report. I ordered the maintenance team chief to work overtime on the problems that were easiest to fix. I also met with the previous officer to discuss his behavior. He said that his actions were like everyone else's, and that no one cared about inaccurate numbers. He may have been right, but I did not find his argument compelling. I told him I would do my best to repair the unit, but that any remaining problems would be reported at the week's end. He was slightly concerned about looking bad to battalion command, but he appreciated my honesty and the efforts I was taking on his behalf.

After a week of almost constant work by mechanics and tankers, four of the six damaged tanks had been repaired. I sent an honest report to the company and battalion commanders documenting the state of affairs. Tank breakdowns are fairly frequent in the army, so the two out-of-service vehicles did not raise suspicion. The outgoing executive officer did receive some harsh words from the company commander, but nothing of great consequence. I had maintained my integrity and minimized damage to my fellow officer. Although I still question the propriety of not exposing his negligence, the decision I made allowed me to preserve the trust of my men and the exacting standards of the army.

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