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Fighting a war, sparing civilians

Jennifer Leaning¹, Michael Lappi²

In today's unconventional combat operations, the need to prepare soldiers to abide by the laws of war has become ever more essential. During two counter-insurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military has accumulated a decidedly mixed public record in its behaviour towards civilians of these two countries.^{1,2} Whether failures to protect civilians from war atrocities are increasing (in our 24-hour media cycle all eyes are on these battlefields), the responsibility of national formal militaries remains clear—attack only military targets and protect civilians from hostile action.

In *The Lancet*, Christopher Warner and colleagues³ report the effectiveness of a battlefield-ethics training programme for US army soldiers during combat deployment in Iraq, between Dec 11, 2007, and Jan 30, 2008. The programme aimed to improve awareness of civilian protection issues and to encourage soldiers to report instances of unethical behaviour among their unit peers. The problems this article addresses are salient: rough handling of non-combatants in daytime operations, night raids inflicting civilian casualties, rogue behaviour of small units, and continued deployment of individual soldiers despite signs of combat stress.

Battlefield-ethics training is also relevant because the US military is widely recognised for the depth of its formal training, has expressly committed to following the laws of war (ie, the precepts of the Geneva Conventions), and in war zones is usually well equipped and heavily armed. So if a prominent military is seen to have serious problems in battlefield conduct, it raises uncomfortable questions for other nations as well as the USA about the quality of military training and leadership, the dynamics of counter-insurgency, and the exigencies of the particular deployment environment.

Warner and colleagues deal only with quality of training. But in counter-insurgency warfare, the effectiveness of training for soldiers looms large. Wars of any kind require soldiers to kill combatants and spare non-combatants. In view of this requirement, counter-insurgency wars fall squarely within the purview of the Geneva Conventions, according to which soldiers are trained in precepts of civilian distinction and protection and rely on principles of reciprocity for the other side to do the same. Yet insurgent tactics in these asymmetric wars depend on hiding fighters among civilians and inflicting damage wherever it can be most visible and hurtful to the other side, an ambition that often lays waste to ordinary non-combatants and their homes.⁴ In military doctrine, counter-insurgency emphasises winning the hearts and minds of local populations while also undertaking hostile operations that require ongoing suspicion and constant vigilance of these same populations.⁵ These ambiguities in role and behaviour prove especially harrowing to infantry soldiers, who must observe the laws of war, claim and

retain the moral high ground, and combat an enemy that wears no uniform and succeeds mainly because it does not play by the rules.

These complex demands make training of soldiers a paramount concern. The US military has become a conventional force of unconventional warriors. Every soldier is now tasked with the dual responsibility of combat actions and civil affairs, often in the same region and on the same day. So although the emphasis on top-down leadership, to drive unit discipline and adherence to norms, still applies, much greater responsibility is now placed on the individual soldier to make immediate and difficult moral decisions independently.⁶ In addition to this stress, the burden of unit fatigue from multiple deployments and increasing duration of combat also exists. A report showed that from March, 2003, to December, 2008, the US Army provided over 1 million troop-years in Afghanistan and Iraq, with most soldiers on their second or third tour.⁷

Warner and colleagues reported the pre-training and post-training incidence of self-reported willingness to speak to authorities about unlawful or unethical behaviour of a unit peer. The study group was 421 soldiers and the baseline willingness to report a peer for mistreating a non-combatant was 36% (143 of 397; 95% CI 31.3—40.7). The intervention, a 60—90 min group training in the laws and norms of war, consisted of viewing war movie vignettes and leader-led discussions about the issues these movies raised. 3—4 months of follow-up showed that after battlefield-ethics training, self-reported willingness to report unethical behaviour increased to 58.9% (248 of 421; 95% CI 54.2—63.6; relative increase 63.6%; $p < 0.0001$).

The strength of this study is that the movie intervention is a time-tested model and readily engages group interest, reaches many soldiers in a short time-frame, and can be used in combat zones, where these issues of moral choice are alive and raw. The weaknesses of the study derive in some measure from its strengths, in that frequent entries and exits of soldiers from the deployment zone introduced sampling issues (eg, pre-training and post-training surveys were not administered to the same group) and concerns about self-report, a modality that is efficient to track but is subject to question regarding link to actual behaviour.

To assess whether this intervention proves to be durable and effective requires further research. Other interventions, such as raising the selection bar for military service and reducing deployment frequency and duration, also warrant consideration. However, soldiers deployed in counter-insurgency operations will always need to fall back on their own capacity, buttressed by sound training, for resilient and nuanced legal and moral choice.

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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a Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, MA 02115, USA

b Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, Harvard Medical School, Cambridge, MA, USA