

Lying to Ourselves Dishonesty in the Army Wong

I'm Lenny Wong, and a few years ago, I published a study here at the Army War College entitled, Lying to Ourselves uh dishonesty in the army profession and what i'd like to do during this devotion is first summarize that study which is going to be really quick and then uh examine uh some the findings and implications of the study from a biblical perspective so it was an army war college study but always in the back is, okay, what's the biblical perspective of that study? So the way this study starts out, it really starts off not recently actually, it started off about 20 years ago. Because back in 2001, the Chief of Staff of the Army came to the Army War College and asked for someone to look into what he saw was a problem. And the problem that he saw was that junior officers were not being innovative or creative because they had so many requirements put on them. And what he wanted is he wanted someone to look at all the non-mission essential training so those are that's training that is non-mission essential that'd be like uh sexual harassment training or we used to have a class called benefits of an honorable discharge um Things like that and he said look we got so much training we put on company commanders Especially that we need to get rid of some he wanted someone to go through and identify every requirement we put on company commanders and and cut it in half.

and that he hoped would be able to restore white space on junior leaders calendars so i got 10 more college students I sent them around the world to collect up every requirement from brigade level all the way up to department of the army level and We discovered it wasn't non-mission essential training. We love to blame it on all the non-mission essential stuff, but we discovered in the armies that is that well here's the summary of what we discovered uh we've discovered that company commanders somehow have to fit 297 days of mandatory training into 256 available training days. So when you take out weekends and holidays and things like that, you only have 256 days and you have to fit 297 days of everything from rifle range to physical training to maintenance to classes on, anything you want. It's just too much. Now, we have a lot of reserve component people listening in.

and they understand that it's not really 256 days it's really maybe 58 days But it still is 297 days of mandatory requirements. So I think the reserve component people really understand this.

much more contrast than the active duty. And so you have the 297 days, and um so i put this in a study called uh cycling innovation It was briefed around and everyone said, oh, this is what a situation we have. And it got put on the shelf, like I said, back in 2001.

But something always stuck in the back of my mind because of this study and because I knew that that it's literally impossible to for company commanders to complete all the mandatory training that's put on them. But I also knew that they could not report that they didn't do the mandatory training because the mandatory training was mandatory and it had to be 100%

completed. And so the question was, what are they reporting if it's literally impossible to accomplish all that they were told to do i knew the answer But I wanted to hear everyone else's response on how do they finagle this in their minds? Because I know it's impossible to do.

and so i i worked with a colleague of mine named steve garris and we did this study together the way we did it was we said okay let's start with interviewing officers. I focused on officers on this. And so we went to go find junior officers. So we went and interviewed individuals and focus groups fort benning georgia to get combat arms uh so uh officers their opinions on this now we told them we wanted to talk about mandatory training we didn't talk about because then nobody would show up. So we said we wanted to talk about mandatory training. So we got Fort Benning, Georgia. We went to Fort Lee, Virginia, where logistics officers hang out.

and we interviewed individuals and focus groups there. We went out to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where we got majors mid-level officers from all branches and then we also uh talked to officers and focus groups uh in from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel at the Army War College. So we got everyone from the junior officers all the way up to senior officers. We also went to the Pentagon and interviewed action officers there.

And I would ask them, first we'd complain about all the mandatory training that we have to do. And that's a lot of fun.

Army people really enjoy doing that because we always point out, you won't believe it, but we have to do one on, you know, some of them were really really ridiculous um but we had a lot of fun doing that but then after a while i'd say so if it's impossible to do all the training what are you reporting And right then it was dead silence because no army officer wants to be accused of lying.

and i was crossing the line and you don't accuse anyone of lying who's in uniform because first of all society tells us that we're you know they put us up on a pedestal saying we could be trusted we tell ourselves that we could be trusted we have all the army values memorized we know everything and so uh But after a while, especially in the junior officers, after me asking the question over and over again, after a while, someone would put their head in their hands.

and they'd say okay fine we lie and then i'd start getting examples and uh one of the most common examples was is that right before a deployment They'd get ready for block leave. They want to put all the soldiers out on block leave. Before they could put on block leave though, they had to show that they had all the mandatory training done.

And so they had to a lot of times get every class they had to show a certificate the way they got certificates they had to put their id card in the computer they had to stamp it out and so uh I said, well, how did you get it done if it was impossible to do? Well, this is the way we did it, they said. They said that we would pick the smartest dude And he would take the training nine times

for everyone else in the squad. And that way they had a certificate to prove that they'd completed it.

Or I had sergeants tell me that the first sergeant would collect up all the platoon sergeants, get them all in the room, he'd lay out all the rosters for all the training and he'd have different colored pens. And then they all signed the rosters in different colored pens. And so this is just the tip of the iceberg, though. These are just examples. And these are almost funny examples.

because a lot of mandatory training is really you sort of question why do we do it in the first place but I discovered that this this goes on across the whole army across all domains and uh and so it's even though we like to trivialize it with the mandatory training it goes into everywhere. For example, it goes into the administrative.

This is an officer evaluation report support form. So it's not the actual evaluation. In the Army we have I see some of you laughing um so we have these support forms and what the support form supposed to do is before you get rated for the next year you're supposed to sit down and write down all your objectives. And then you're supposed to be counseled once a quarter on how well you met those objectives. So when you go to turn in your evaluation or your boss turns in your evaluation, You should have all your objectives. They should have your quarterly counseling when you were counseled and your initials beside it and uh and this is a really nice setup except for the fact that it's a really good officer who sits down with you at the beginning of your session of the beginning of your year and says here's your performance objectives that's really nice but it's a really exceptional, exceptional person that can sit down and do it every quarter because someone's gone or someone's too busy or someone forgets or in the reserve component you're living across the country and can't even get with the person. And yet when it comes time to turn in these officer evaluation reports, the clerk or the sergeant major says, Okay, where's the support form? Wait a minute. Where are the dates and the initials? at that point you say I didn't do it and the sergeant major or the clerk says where are the dates and initials at which point the two officers will go off in the different room or virtually do this and say, okay, what dates are we going to say that we did counseling that never occurred? And the only thing they'll worry about is what date to put down because for the active duty it can't be a weekend and it can't be a holiday for the reserve component it's got to be a weekend. And so they agonize over the lie, but they give no thought to the initials that go right beside the lie.

that's a symptom so that's administrative another administrative one that was very popular was that for a long time in the army if a soldier wanted to go on leave they had to turn in a leave form, a DA form 31. But accompanying that leave form had to go something they had to go online and they had something called the travel risk planning system or trips and what they discovered was that you know a lot of soldiers get in trouble they get car wrecks or they They have bad planning when they go on leave. And so maybe we could solve that by having a

program where they have to go in and enter everything about the trip that they're about to go on. And so they have to say how far they're going, when they're going to take breaks, what's their rest plan, are they taking any medicine, Who are they telling what kind of conditions their car they enter all this data? into the online form and uh if they put in there i'm not going to take any stops it rejects them so they can't turn in the form so what they do is they have to placate the form and they make the form say you're approved and then they could turn that form in with the leave form And what I've discovered is that when everyone, this was a prime example everyone used of how tens of thousands of these were turned in.

that were completely false because all the person wanted to do was go on leave. And so they just fed it what it wanted to hear, and it was totally useless.

So again, these are examples. We see it moving from mandatory training to administrative to now safety.

But it also got very serious. And so, because I would ask him, so what goes on down range thinking that maybe.

uh when when you're deployed that things get more serious and you know that the risk of lying produces more consequences. So maybe it didn't occur there. Well, a common example for the downrange environment was storyboards.

What storyboards are is a PowerPoint slide that a junior officer would have to fill out with narratives, with pictures, with maps. Every time they went out of the wire, every time something happened, but it also became every time they returned no matter what and so if they shot a dog on the combat outpost they had to knock out a storyboard if uh donkey fell off the cliff they had to knock out a storyboard and so it became a burden to junior officers to knock these out And so what they started doing, at least what they told me, was they either fabricated them or reused them or cut and pasted because they didn't know where they where they went and so they turned in these to to the intelligence officers and it became a very common example of lying but we don't call it lying because what happens is that This would go on through, like I said, all different domains. And so it happened with logistics. It happened with maintenance. It happened with dealing with the foreign countries when a unit would come in.

We're gonna rate them as either red or green or yellow. In other words, they're really that partner unit, they'd say, they're green, they're all trained, we're ready to leave and go redeploy home. The next unit would come in, they'd take that exact unit and they'd grade them red or yellow until they're ready to leave then they turn green again again just telling the system what it wants to hear because what we had was Well, we developed what we call an organizational culture in the Army. Well, an organizational culture, first of all, is It's all those beliefs, values, and norms that develop unofficially cope with problems. And once they work well enough to cope

with the problem, they're considered valid. And therefore, it's passed on to new members. It just gets passed on and passed on. No one writes it down. It just gets passed on.

And what we've done in the Army is that we've developed a culture where you tell the system what it wants to hear you lie to the system you lie to your superior because they're part of the system but the funny thing is everyone knows it's a lie At the same time, we have another culture where we talk about integrity and honor. And so what we have is we have junior leaders that have a foot in both cultures.

They have one that they can parrot the army values, the oaths and everything. But they have another one that It tells the system what it wants to hear because they just have to do the business. And the way they deal with that in their minds because they have these two sides of their brain fighting against each other one's the profession one's the bureaucracy something happens called ethical fading And that's where we take the moral colors, the black and white, the right or wrong, and we fade that away.

and it's no longer an ethical decision. It's not an ethical dilemma because we take the ethics out of it.

And this isn't because we have bad leaders. It's not because we don't have enough ethical training. It's because things happen.

That we constantly pound them junior leaders asking for their signature, their initials or to certify this or use their.

uh id card to verify this or whatever that eventually we fade away the ethical dimensions and this becomes a way of doing business, a way of getting things done, a way of getting things through the system.

Now, I did this in the Army, and I only studied the Army, but what I discovered was is that This exists a lot of other places, including the other services. I didn't even know it, but the Navy even has a name for it. And that's...

Does anyone know? Gun decking. Gun decking. And that's where an inspection team will come up to a ship and they'll hand them a set of books and say here inspect this and the set of books was just It was all falsified to pass the inspection and the inspectors look at it and they sort of know it and they check the blocks and then they move on.

uh and so it's not just this we see this in education we see this in the medical field um That's what I discovered after this study hit the streets and people started saying we have this where we are. So what are the observations then?well what i discovered is that you know the junior leaders the junior officers they love to talk about this because it's something no one wants to talk about and it's something that they have to endure and uh and so they like it that someone's

willing to talk about it but at the same time i discovered that senior leaders would find it very difficult to admit that this culture of ethical fading exists in the Army. I think today they're more apt to admit it, but when it was first coming out, it was just denial it was uh actually anger that uh someone was pointing this out and the corollary to that is that i discovered that senior leaders We're very reluctant to recall times when they lie because there's a tendency to romanticize the past.

Or if they can remember anything, they can remember the one time that they were the only person that told the truth, but everyone else lied. Or they remember how in their unit, Everyone was free to tell the truth. And it was the one unit in the army that didn't have this culture.

Okay, I think we're to the end of just about to the end of that presentation. And so I'm going to go to And just ask him, it's been 2015 when this report came out.

And it's been about two or three years ago since you presented what we just saw.

Have you continued to think about this? And if so, any new things that you would like to add to the discussion? Sure. Well, since it came out in the army, uh, the secretary of the army picked up on it and, uh, The Secretary of the Army tried to figure out if it was true what I was saying, and the Secretary of the Army said, bring me I would like to go pretend I'm going on a four day pass this weekend. Let me try to work out this trips, this travel risk planning system that is in the study and he sat down and he tried for 13 minutes to figure it out, to apply for a weekend pass, and it rejected him every time, and he never got through it.

And he says in his book, he wrote a book called Sacred Oath. He writes, and that was the end of trips.

um but that's an example here's the secretary of the army couldn't even do it himself would have to lie if he wants to go on a weekend pass um And he couldn't do it, and that's what he said. So the Secretary of the Army sent out a series of 16 memos and each one of the meadows had this is what we're getting rid of we're getting rid of field sanitation team training we're getting rid of benefits of vulnerable discharge chaining. We're getting rid of the requirement to do a safety thing on this. And they went through and got rid of tons of stuff.

And that was Secretary Mark Esper. That was a while ago. And since then, everything's crept back in.

And so it still continues in the army today. As far as me personally, what changed in me was giving a briefing to Axe three years ago, And what you haven't seen on this part of the video is the questions following the video saying, so what's your advice for junior leaders? I could tell you what my advice was, but there was a reaction there. It was like, how could you say that? That's horrible what you're saying. And I had to reflect on that. And that's, don't want to say

haunted me but it really made me think because the christian parallel in my mind is extremely strong um because before Jesus came on the scene we had religious leaders Pharisees and Sadducees who started putting burdens on the Jewish people Saying if you want to be a good Jew do this do this do this do this and they were right If you want to be a good you you want to honor God do this do this, but they created so many requirements that Jesus pointed out that you've created a burden that no one could stand and he looked at the Pharisees and said look what you've done you've got these people so burdened down that that they're walking around and he said, I have a yoke. It's a yoke, but my burden is easy and my burden is light. And that's the parallel is that in the army, I realized that the army was trying to be just like the Pharisees, well-intentioned, but trying to say, if you want to be a good leader, you got to do this, this, this, this. And we're going to check on you by asking you.

Did you do it? Did your troops do it? Did you get it done? Sign here, sign here, sign here, and promise me that everything's fine. And what they don't have...

that Jesus had that God has his grace because we can't be perfect under the religious law And Jesus brought us grace and said, no, go through me and you'll be perfect. But we don't have that in the army.

We don't have that in the army, but we expect perfection from our officers. And it's hard for Christian officers because we want to be perfect.

holy we want to be close to perfect but we can't be but As far as serving God, well, we got Jesus. But as far as serving the army, we don't have anything. And so I don't have an answer. I don't have an answer when you live in a system That says, tell me everything's perfect. Reality is nothing's perfect. I can't tell me everything's perfect. And here's something interesting that happened with this study.

To do this study, I had to do what they call an institutional review board.

And so that's a board in the Army that says, are you doing your research correctly? Are you not hurting people? Are you making sure you're abiding by all the protections? and I submitted my institutional review board packet that said, when I interview officers, I'll tell them this is all voluntary. You don't have to be here. You can leave any time.

It's all going to be anonymous. I'm just collecting everyone's thoughts, but your name will not be used. Does anyone want to leave? OK, let's talk.

Well, the Institutional Review Board, after I finished the study, called me up and said, you know how we gave you permission? Well, we really think now you need a permission slip for everyone you talk to and they have to sign it. And I said, do you realize I already finished the study? They

said to me, you're going to need a permission slip from everyone you talk to. Do you promise to do that? And I said, I've already talked to them.

And I said, do you know what the study's about? And they said, you're going to need a permission slip from everyone you talk to. And so I hung up the phone and I just sat back and I said, I can't believe this. And then the phone rang. It was an old colonel friend of mine. And he said, Lenny, I said, Bob, how you doing? He says, hey, I'm on this institutional review board.

Listen, all they want to hear you say is, yes, I will. And I said, Bob, I can't. It's over. It's done. He says, Lenny, all they want to hear you say is, yes, I will.

So the phone rang again. It was an institutional review board. And they said, will you make everyone sign a sheet of paper saying that they gave permission to talk? And I said, yes, I will do that for any I do now.

But that's an example is that I understand where they're coming from because they went through their records and said, well, this is going to get a little dicey talking about lying in the army. Maybe we should tighten it up.

And all they wanted me to do was say, yeah, okay, I'll do it. That's the dilemma we're in.

is that I understand where you're coming from, but there's no grace in the system. And I don't know how to explain to a junior officer except that when you get to be a senior officer you better remember this and you better work to change it but I don't have an easy solution for junior officers so how has this changed I really don't like it. I don't have a solution for junior officers, Cal.

And this is our discussion, is to look at different things. I go way back on this issue to Cleo Buxton.

And Cleo Buxton had a little saying is you don't make a rule unless you have to have one. All right. I arrived as a staff member.

at the naval academy for ocf i was the new staff member and i walked And there's a list of about 15 or 20 different things that you will not do. And I said, no, that's not Buck.

So I said, we scrapped the whole list. And they were well-intentioned things.

But some of them were a little ridiculous too. But in any event, so we scrapped the whole thing.

And during my time there, I made three rules that I had to make. Two of them happened right away.

I don't need to go into this story, but I just wanted to say, at least in OCF, we have a pioneer that started working on that problem. And years later, I remembered and I implemented what what

he was talking about. And so I think it's something that happens in churches. It happens everywhere.

And I think it's cross-cultural. It would be interesting to hear our interns, perhaps from Uganda, if they want to comment.

uh on that but uh let's turn it over to others now for for for some discussion then i'll I'll come to Jeff in a moment, too, because he had some interaction on this as well. But go ahead, Terry. Yeah. I mean, we're great. Great.

training, Lenny, thank you so much and much needed, not just when you did it, but still even today.

But as you were talking there, you know, I was just mindful of Acts 15, you know, when Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey.

You know, they've been trying to convert some Hellenistic Jews and they've run into these difficulties. And I counseled on that and said, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

to lay on you, no greater burden than these few necessary things. And they really only came up with two, which was stay away from idols and stay away from sexual immorality.

I mean, even the things, you know, the strangling and the blood and so forth were idol related.

And it just seems like even those things need to go on. That kind of review needs to go on.

at a high level and at a unit level. No kidding. What are those absolutely essential things? We're going to major on the majors here.

And, you know, and the rest of it, what, I mean, you know that, but I experienced it. I experienced it as a junior officer and I can tell you all the stories about how it didn't happen at my unit as a commander, just like you said I would do, but I'm quite sure it did.

And you get in this horrible habit of kind of turning your head to it to get the job done.

Right. And my fear is what does it do to us? Yes. Because we start calling it's not a lie. It is a lie.

And okay, it's something stupid you lied about, but it's a lie. Now, it's the same thing I encountered going on a missions trip.

And we had duffel bags full of clothing. And we were told, okay, when they stop you and they're going to say, are you bringing any goods or clothing or anything like that? You're supposed to tell them no. And I just looked and said, really? I mean, this is a missions trip. We're supposed to lie to the customs people? And the answer is either that or give them a bribe. And that's the culture.

And so we have a culture like that in the army. And is that, you know, no one really expects you to do this training or no one really expects you to read the information awareness, nineteen hundred word document before you log on to your computer. But just check. Yes, I read everything and it works.

It really affects who we are. Unfortunately, the people at the bottom have a hard time changing the system. It's the people at the top.

The people on the bottom experience it. I just want to mention one other thing and then I'll be done for the day, Cal. I know I've taken too much time here.

I and Bernhard and a couple of others visited faith comes by hearing, uh, about two weeks ago, which is a ministry in Albuquerque that's focused on oral traditions and audio Bibles and so forth.

And anyway, they have produced a little tiny device with a single with a single little earphone deal, one single wire, and it goes down to a little box that'll play the audio Bible in your ear.

and it was specifically designed for Muslim women, that they can hide under their hajib and And if their husband sees it, he says, what are you doing? What are you listening to? Well, I'm listening to music here. I'll show you. And when you take, you find the little box, there's a safety button on it and you push it.

and it erases the Bible and plays music.

And does this fit in the category as wise as serpents, innocent as doves? Does it fit in the category of lying? These are really, difficult things.

And, you know, that's why I'm glad we live in the New Testament age under grace, just like you said.

Okay, Cal, that's it. I'm muting myself. Sorry. Gary Potter's had his hand raised. Gary? Jerry? Jerry, your mic's off. Right. Sorry about that. I had to find the mic initially. I'll put the video on.

Pardon me for not shaving. It's a bit of a vacation period for me. I'm trying to remember what my question was.

I guess there's so many, but one of them, Lenny, thank you first. I was that part of the, of the audience the first time you presented.

And again, grateful for the presentation. It's interesting to me as I think about your experience, as the researcher and how you were asked to after the research was conducted to go back or to say that you already did get voluntary authorization from each individual and there was that pressure which was I suppose a little bit, it could be unnerving or

just irrational pressure no, we need you to do this. And so I wondered to myself, Lenny, and maybe you know, and this is the question, why was that pressure put upon you what was the rationale do you think behind the request What was the rationale behind the request? I think they were afraid they were going to be audited.

and their judgment in letting this study go ahead would be questioned and they were hoping that i would could give them cover. So they went back and inserted it in. So, so someone reviews it, then they say, good to go. And, uh, And so I, you know, so I had to say to myself themselves to cover. Right. Which is a lot of why do we have suicide prevention training? Well, one is to stop suicides, but another one is to show people, look, we're doing something for this problem.

And so a lot of times, cynically, we say they're trying to cover themselves. But a lot of times it's because we have a problem and we're trying to cover that problem. Right.

In my world, in my mind and my world, it's the politicization of a system.

and it's politicized much,