

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Personal Reflections on the Tactical Meeting the Ethical

Margaret Klein, U.S. Naval War College

Timothy Demy, U.S. Naval War College

How are ethics manifested in a squadron environment? In the tactical environment of aviation, there are many programs built on a foundation of ethical theory and lessons learned. Such programs and lessons are the result of more than a century of civilian and military aviation operations in war and peace. Hard-learned lessons have resulted in programs designed to make every flight a successful flight.

Philosophers and scholars, probably more familiar with the ill-fated flight of Icarus in Greek mythology than with the daily operations of an aviation squadron, have described moral decision-making for centuries. In understanding ethics as a branch of philosophy, there is recognition that ethical values and actions permeate the lives of every individual—personally and professionally. The application of the philosophical inquiries and scholarship is left to leaders who bring ethical decision-making to life when they model virtuous behavior.

In my<sup>1</sup> first squadron, I encountered one of the most basic programs found across military aviation—the issuing and control of tools used to repair military aircraft. Tool control is foundational to military aviation and everyone who works to maintain or fly aircraft uses the program. It was one of the earliest practical examples of integrating ethical judgment and principles of the profession of arms. We use ethical judgment to decide to report anything that might harm the crew maintaining or flying the aircraft, even down to a lost pen that might be lodged in the aircraft flight controls.

The following thoughts are some of the key tensions and questions of ethical leadership that we think might be present in every squadron or tactical unit. In the example of tool control, what makes it work? Loyalty, fear, and obedience are some of the things I thought about when I first encountered the program. I found it important for leaders to understand their people so I could understand what motivated them to adhere to norms and standards.

---

<sup>1</sup> All first-person pronoun references are Klein's.

This seemed like an academic exercise until one of my sailors violated the program; then I had to decide what kind of punishment should be applied when someone chose to violate the rules. Yet, as we know, leadership is not only about “them.” It is also about “me.” As a member of the profession of arms, I have internalized my responsibility to hold myself and my organization accountable for all of our actions. Has everyone in my squadron developed to the point where they understand that the trust of the American people rests at least partially on the trust that we will hold ourselves accountable? Ethics in the toolroom is as important as ethics in the wardroom.

The ethical decisions one makes daily at the tactical level affect self, subordinates, seniors, and the command. Such decisions and the decision-making process become more complex as a leader rises in rank and assumes increased responsibility. Ethical decision-making is a fundamental aspect of good leadership at every level.

Ethics should not be relegated to the abstract or hypothetical. It is an integral part of leadership and

interaction with those we lead. Ethical decision-making is done by every person in the command. A leader’s ability to shape decision-making abilities in subordinates requires knowledge of the members of the command as people and as professionals. If we know our people, we can be empathetic because we have context for what else is impacting their performance at work. If we are empathetic, we can apply corrective action when needed that will serve to change the behavior going forward. Empathy has also helped us treat others with respect, while still acknowledging that they made an error in judgment. The corrective action is assigned to the individual who violated the rules, and it also reverberates across the organization as fellow squadron members make sense of how rules are enforced. The squadron leader has the opportunity to discuss the case with the rest of the squadron, a step that we overlooked more than we should have done.

The toolroom is not the only workspace in the squadron where ethical decisions are made. For example, let’s get out of the realm of aircraft maintenance and look at how an aircrewman gets certified for their role in the aircraft. In my squadron experience, the most

---

**Margaret “Peg” Klein, RADM (Ret), USN**, serves as the Dean of Leadership and Ethics for the Naval War College, where she is charged with supporting the Navy’s leader development framework and leader development for Flag Officers and Senior Executives. She graduated from the Naval Academy and earned her EdD from the University of Pennsylvania in 2021. Rear Admiral (Retired) Klein’s Flag assignments included Secretary of Defense’s Advisor for Military Professionalism, Chief of Staff for United States Cyber Command, Commander, Expeditionary Strike Group Five that included Operation Odyssey Dawn, and Operations Officer for Naval Network Warfare Command. Klein also served as the 82nd Commandant of Midshipmen at the US Naval Academy and commanded the TACAMO/E-6 nuclear command and control wing, and commanded the Ironmen of VQ-3. Her husband, Frank, retired from the Navy and teaches physics at the Naval Academy. They have two adult children who help to make the world better.

**Timothy J. Demy, ThD, PhD**, is Professor of Military Ethics at the U.S. Naval War College. He also is an Affiliated Scholar, Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics, Georgetown University Medical Center, and Visiting Fellow in Religion and Theology at Durham University (UK). Prior to his faculty appointment, he served 27 years as a chaplain in the U.S. Navy afloat and ashore with units of the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Coast Guard.

proficient and knowledgeable junior officer certified others as “qualified” once they passed oral and written exams and an inflight checkride. As I look back on who evaluated my fellow officers, I realize that proficiency and knowledge were two obvious skills, but that things like judgment and integrity were also needed if check rides were going to be administered fairly. If we didn’t choose someone with those characteristics, how did we know that the system was applied evenly across the squadron of over 100 officers? We didn’t.

A final piece of this process of ethical leadership is to understand how we treat people who are not able to measure up to our flying standards. At the personal level, it is important that we separate a person’s worth from their ability to meet our standards. In the highly competitive culture of military aviation, how often do we associate performance in the air with worth as a human being? How might you separate the two or should you?

Every branch of the military has a specific set of core values that are the foundational attitudes and actions expected of every person in the organization. For the Navy, they are “honor, courage, and commitment” and for the Air Force, they are “integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.” Various expressed but overlapping in essence, the core values of the military branches are a 21st-century manifestation of virtue ethics. The thought of Aristotle in the toolroom might seem anachronous, but it isn’t.

Habits of moral excellence are not achieved quickly or as a once-for-all action. They are instilled, nurtured, and practiced throughout one’s life. As with so many things we experience and practice daily in the world of aviation, moral excellence is a repetitive action that

strengthens the ethical skills of the individual. We must encourage and expect ethical proficiency just as we expect tactical proficiency—and we as leaders must consistently exhibit it and be exemplars of it.

We began this reflection with an illustration of tool control and its importance in aircraft maintenance. In closing, we ask you to consider another procedure common to every squadron and flight—the FOD (Foreign Object Damage) walkdown in which squadron members comb the flightline for debris. It

***In the highly competitive culture of military aviation, how often do we associate performance in the air with worth as a human being? How might you separate the two or should you?***

too, is a process critical to aviation, in that a very small piece of debris can destroy a very large aircraft and crew. Small and seemingly insignificant things can be catastrophic. In reality, there is no insignificant FOD. Similarly, we should lead and act with a mindset saying that there are no small ethical decisions—there are only ethical decisions. Every ethical decision a leader makes is important. The decision is important for the officer and for the people she or he leads—and just as there are no insignificant ethical decisions, neither are there any insignificant people in the squadron. Every individual, whether enlisted, officer, civilian, or contractor has inherent dignity and worth. For the leader, that means every decision and interpersonal interaction involves the character of the leader, and the character of the leader should be a personal and professional reflection of moral excellence. The standards that we require of ourselves and others, regardless of rank,

title, or position are no lesser or greater today than it was centuries ago. What we expect in the toolroom, the flight line, the wardroom, or any other place in a squadron is no different than what Aristotle sought in the academy or the agora of ancient Greece. The actions of our hands come from the attitudes and values of our heads and hearts. Values have consequences. What do you think?

♦ ♦ ♦