

THIRD PLACE RECIPIENT

When Responsibilities Conflict

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"...four steps, face, boom..."

God, when will this end? It's 87 degrees and we've been standing here since 3:30. It's been close to two hours since school ended. I've zoned out for the better part of ten minutes as First Sergeant talks to the unit's senior chiefs. I'm a platoon commander, which means I need to at least pretend to pay attention. A few people in my platoon are whispering; I don't bother telling them to be quiet. If I had someone to talk to, I'd be whispering too.

I look around and my eyes settle on a figure on the floor. A cadet—his hands are on his head, face down, eyes shut. No one around him is saying anything. When I look closer, I realize he's swaying back and forth. Someone needs to check on him. Yet, he's far away and not even in the same battalion as me.

I look towards First Sergeant. I know I would be reprimanded for abandoning my post, but if I didn't, I would spend the rest of practice wondering whether I should have acted. I start walking. Behind the platoons and through rows of cadets, I find a medic to help him. The other platoon commanders warn me to go back, but I keep walking. I later learned the cadet had fainted.

When I put myself back in that 87-degree heat, neither choice seemed wrong. On the one hand, I had a clear obligation to lead my platoon, whereas the cadet I had seen was not my responsibility. However, in that moment, ignoring him conflicted with the values I held as a person outside of the unit.

The situation taught me that ethics isn't always a question of which choice is right, but rather, what to do when two responsibilities conflict. As a platoon commander, my duty lay with the cadets directly under me, but being a leader did not exempt me from looking out for others. I learned then that ethics in leadership isn't simply about looking out for your team; it's about using your own judgment when the ethical decision is not clearly defined.

Throughout the whole ordeal, I was uncertain. Every warning from my fellow platoon commanders made me reconsider turning around. I did not know what was wrong with the cadet, but I also wasn't sure if he was completely okay. Despite this, I knew I could find someone qualified to help him. If I were wrong, I would have missed a few minutes of instructional time. If I were right, someone who needed help would receive it.

I no longer let the fear of punishment determine my willingness to help others. There will be times when my responsibilities conflict, and I will never know if I made the right decision. What I can be sure of is that, from that day forward, I became more willing to act in line with my values and look out for the well-being of those around me.