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Moral Courage

When the "Line in the Sand" Demands a Response

Nikki Coleman

On October 1, 2020, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) launched a single set of Defence Values as a part of the Chief of Defence Force's cultural reform process, *Pathway to Change 2017–2022*. These values are:¹

- Service: the selflessness of character to place the security and interests of our nation and its people ahead of my own
- Courage: the strength of character to say and do the right thing, always, especially in the face of adversity
- Respect: the humanity of character to value others and treat them with dignity
- Integrity: the consistency of character to align my thoughts, words, and actions to do what is right
- Excellence: the willingness of character to strive each day to be the best I can be, both professionally and personally

All members of the ADF, including civilians working in the Australian Public Service (APS), are expected to abide by and live up to these values. What this means in practice is that the values are discussed regularly from the highest ranks of the ADF down to the lowest, through forums such as the ADF annual report to the CO's hour on bases and ships. Even the Religious Advisory Committee to the Services (RACS) have created an in-depth guide for all ADF members on Defence values and behaviours. This document puts forward the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Sikh responses to Defence values in order to encourage ADF members of faith to align their own personal religious values with that of the Defence Values.² The Defence values are displayed prominently in most ADF buildings and ships, and additionally are often used to hold all ADF members accountable for their actions in disciplinary matters.

1. "Our Values. Defence: Overview," Department of Defence, accessed 30 July 2022, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/at-a-glance>.

2. "RACS Response to Defence Values," Religious Advisory Committee to the Services, 2021.

The ADF does not just talk about courage as a value, it also awards decorations (medals), commendations, and unit citations for outstanding heroic courage in action—the highest of these decorations being the Victoria Cross. The Victoria Cross is Australia’s highest military honour, granted sparingly for “the most conspicuous gallantry, or daring or pre-eminent acts of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.”³ It is vitally important that these acts of self-sacrifice and courage are recognised in this way. However, it does raise the question of why only acts of physical courage are recognised and rewarded. Currently Australia does not have a specific award or decoration to recognise moral courage. Where a member of the ADF has had the “strength of character to say and do the right thing in the face of adversity,” we do not recognise or reward that Defence member for their moral courage.⁴ This then raises the question—Why, as an institution, does the ADF have courage as a core value—especially since in the ADF values statement it is by definition moral courage that we should all aspire to—if we do not actually value it enough to recognise and reward moral courage? I will discuss this further later on in my paper, but for now, let us turn our attention to the question of “What is moral courage?”

What is moral courage?

In *On War*, Clausewitz argued that there are two kinds of courage—physical courage and moral courage—but that both are vitally important in war.⁵ As Clausewitz states, some actions will be examples of both physical and moral courage, which in turn makes it difficult to separate the two at times. The actions of those protecting civilians at the Mỹ Lai massacre are an example of both moral courage (standing up to their own troops who were raping and killing unarmed civilians) and physical courage (putting their physical safety at risk in order to save the civilians from being killed).⁶ Whilst some situations make it difficult to separate physical and moral courage, there are examples of courage which is either physical or moral courage in nature.

3. “Gallantry Decorations,” The Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia, accessed 31 July 2022, <https://www.gg.gov.au/australian-honours-and-awards/gallantry-decorations>.

4. Department of Defence, “Our Values: Overview.”

5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 3, accessed 23 August 2022, www.clausewitz.com/readings/OnWar1873/BK1ch03.html.

6. Hugh Thompson, “The Heroes of My Lai. Hugh Thompson,” University of Missouri-Kansas City, accessed 05 September 2016, http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/Myl_hero.html#RON.

In her chapter on courage in *Military Virtues*, Pauline Shanks Kaurin argues that physical courage in the military is often seen as the “courage of the warrior,” where a person risks their own physical safety to win a military objective or rescue those in peril.⁷ In the ADF, we recognise this physical courage through various awards and gallantry decorations for heroic courage in action. An example of this was the awarding of the Victoria Cross to Trooper Mark Donaldson in 2009 for his rescue of an interpreter whilst under heavy enemy fire.⁸ In the civilian sphere, we also recognise and reward physical courage through the Australian Bravery Decorations.⁹ These acts of physical courage by our military members and those in the community should absolutely be recognised and rewarded. They remind us of the lengths that ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances will go to in order to rescue or protect vulnerable people and to protect Australia and its interests. The process for awarding these decorations is long and thorough, beginning in Defence with nominations from the chain of command, as well as a thorough investigation into whether both the recipient and the actions nominated are worthy of recognition, especially when it is Australia’s highest decoration, the Victoria Cross. Thus, a significant number of resources are put towards examining acts of physical courage by ADF members. If the ADF truly wants its members to stand up and do the right thing, I would argue that we need to be more proactive in recognising those who have shown extraordinary moral courage at great risk and cost to themselves. Being intentional about encouraging, recognising, and rewarding moral courage would potentially require similar resources being allocated as are currently allocated to the recognition of physical courage.

One barrier to rewarding moral courage is that it has the potential to accidentally expose those who have not shown moral courage themselves. This tension around moral courage places a pressure on those in command as they balance these tensions between recognising their subordinates for displaying outstanding moral courage against the potential of highlighting the lack of moral courage of others involved in the same situation if they were aware of the unacceptable behaviour and did not take action against it. If a commander then recognises a member for their moral courage in

7. Pauline Shanks Kaurin, “Courage: Overview” in *Military Virtues*, ed Michael Skerker et al, (Havant, UK: Howgate Publishing, 2019), 104.

8. “Act of Gallantry, Trooper Mark Donaldson VC,” Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 23 August 2022, www.pmc.gov.au/act-gallantry.

9. “Australian Bravery Decorations,” Governor General of Australia, accessed 23 August 2022, www.gg.gov.au/australian-honours-and-awards/australian-bravery-decorations.

calling out unacceptable behaviour, it additionally puts more senior members in the awkward position of having to answer questions over their own handling of the situation. This highlights the unusual situation where if an organisation does not genuinely value moral courage, the act of *rewarding* moral courage becomes an act of moral courage in itself.

This fraught situation creates a dissonance between the promotion of moral courage through values statements and cultural reform programs, whilst morally courageous behaviour may be overlooked or requires an act of moral courage itself to reward such behaviour. This situation does not set up an organisation to succeed in promoting moral courage of its members or bring about change through cultural reform programs. When leaders must risk their careers to reward examples of exemplary moral courage, we are further compounding injustices in situations where acts of moral courage could have prevented the harm that unacceptable or illegal behaviour brings about.

Additionally, if leaders turn a blind eye to or even cover up these poor behaviours, all those working with and under them notice it. This is further compounded when commanders are at the same time calling on their subordinates to show moral courage and “do the right thing.”¹⁰ This dissonance between words and actions undermines the moral authority of military organisations, which has far-reaching implications on the organisation to provide vital capability. Unfortunately this gap between words and actions regarding moral courage (and integrity) also leads to experienced and capable military members leaving their service because they feel that they can no longer work in an organisation which promotes one thing (by including courage in values statements and codes of behaviour), but then acts contrary to that value.¹¹ This drain from the organisation of highly principled military members significantly impacts the culture of a military organisation, as well as the capability provided by those members, which ultimately has a negative impact on national security.

There is a spectrum of situations that will demand moral courage. For some, the “line in the sand” will be speaking up when seeing unacceptable behaviour in the form of bullying or sexual harassment. For others, it will be a moment when they have to show moral courage to save the lives of others.

10. The official ADF policy is that there is zero tolerance to unacceptable behaviour. However, numerous submissions to the Royal Commission show that this is not happening in every case, with particular concerns regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault cases.

11. The value of courage and integrity are closely linked. However, I will not be examining integrity in this paper due to space constraints.

Probably the most famous example of this extreme impact of moral courage is when helicopter pilot Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson and his flight crew intervened in the Mỹ Lai massacre in 1968. Through their selfless and repeated actions of placing themselves between US troops and unarmed civilians, they showed enormous physical and moral courage.¹² After the massacre, Warrant Officer Thompson was placed under enormous pressure to assist in the multiple cover-ups of the events of that day and was threatened with disciplinary action for turning his weapons on American soldiers.¹³ Instead of being rewarded for showing moral and physical courage in stopping the slaughter and rape of innocent civilians, Thompson was ostracised by his peers, vilified by the public, and even received death threats long after he had left the military.¹⁴ It was only in 1998, after a long letter-writing campaign by Professor David Egan and others, that Warrant Officer Thompson and the fellow members of his helicopter crew were recognised for their moral courage at Mỹ Lai with the Soldiers Medal award. The actions of Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson and his flight crew on that day are a shining example of moral courage at great personal cost to themselves.

In 2013, then Chief of Army Lt. Gen. David Morrison released a video to all members of the Australian Army which quickly went public and spread virally around the world.¹⁵ In this video and in subsequent speeches, Lt. Gen. Morrison was speaking out against the abhorrent behaviour of some army members towards women, behaviour which he described as “explicit, derogatory, demeaning and repugnant.”¹⁶ As a female military ethicist based at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra, I received dozens of emails from colleagues all around the world commenting on the video. There are

12. Hugh Thompson, “The Heroes of My Lai. Hugh Thompson.” University of Missouri-Kansas City, accessed 05 September 2016, http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/Myl_hero.html#RON.

13. “Obituary: Hugh Thompson Jr., My Lai rescuer, dies at 62,” *The New York Times*, 06 January 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/06/world/americas/obituary-hugh-thompson-jr-my-lai-rescuer-dies-at-62.html>.

14. Hugh Thompson, “Moral Courage in Combat: The My Lai Story: Lecture,” United States Naval Academy. Annapolis MD: U.S. Naval Academy Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, accessed 22 August 2022, http://www.usna.edu/Ethics/publications/documents/ThompsonPg1-28_Final.pdf

15. *Everyone Matters*, “Australian Chief to Sexist Soldiers: Respect Women or GET OUT,” YouTube video, accessed 23 August 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRQBtDtZTGA> (unfortunately the official Australian Army YouTube account no longer has the video of Lt. Gen. Morrison available online).

16. “Australian military investigates ‘explicit emails,’” *BBC News Service*, accessed 23 August 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22885465>.

many interesting moments in the video, but seeing a visibly angry Chief of Army, who was vibrating with rage as he told those who can't get behind an inclusive army to "get out," was especially memorable.¹⁷ Lt. Gen. Morrison encouraged soldiers to "show moral courage and take a stand" against unacceptable behaviour, stating that he would "be ruthless in ridding the army of people who cannot live up to its values."¹⁸ However, the most famous line from the video was "the standard you walk past is the standard you accept."¹⁹

From Lt. Gen. Morrison's approach it was clear that this was a turning point for how unacceptable behaviour would be handled in the Australian Army and the wider Australian Defence Force. "The Standard You Walk Past is the Standard You Accept" became famous for encouraging good bystander (or upstander) behaviour. For years after this video aired, every military ethics conference I attended had at least one presentation use this phrase and talk about it as a turning point in for women in military organisations all over the world.²⁰ I have seen it on bumper stickers, T-shirts, and email signatures all around the world.

While I am very proud to be part of the Australian Defence Force, which has had such a high-ranking leader as Lt. Gen. Morrison speak out forcefully against unacceptable behaviour, I wish there had been more advances in stamping out unacceptable behaviour in the ADF.²¹ Instead of the ADF having a reputation for how well we deal with sexual assaults, sexual harassment and bullying, we are unfortunately currently being named by victims as an organisation who covers up these behaviours.^{22,23} Sadly, those who show moral courage and speak out against these unacceptable behaviours are often seen to be the problem instead of those who perpetrate and/or cover up the abuse. Despite the official policy that victims and impacted units are to be advised of outcomes, some feel the system is used

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Tom Stayner, "Sexual Assault Complaints in Australian Defence Force Soar to Eight-year High," *SBS News*, 22 October 2021, www.sbs.com.au/news/article/sexual-assault-complaints-in-australian-defence-force-soar-to-eight-year-high/dqdhwuknv.

22. "Uniform Justice: Telegraph campaign to end defence abuse of women," *Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 2022, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/uniform-justice-telegraph-campaign-to-end-defence-abuse-of-women/>.

23. Harley Dennet, "ADF Victims of sexual assault rising, not told of military justice outcomes: report," *The Canberra Times*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7676819/defence-chiefs-warned-of-rising-sexual-misconduct-as-victims-lose-faith/>.

to protect the abusers; at the very least there is the perception that this is the case, because victims and impacted members are not told of military actions against those found guilty of abuse.²⁴

This lack of “transparency of management of outcomes” was found by Professor Pru Goward to be of concern in her IGADF inquiry into handling of sexual misconduct in the ADF.²⁵ She additionally found that the “increase in the use of administrative action to address sexual misconduct” rather than the use of the Defence Force Discipline Act, limited the “transparency of management outcomes” leading to Commanding Officers struggling “between the competing principles of privacy and closure for victims in providing advice to victims on the outcome of their sexual misconduct complaints.”²⁶ This may be why Professor Goward found that the majority of victims who gave feedback to the IGADF inquiry “considered the process had been unfair and unsupportive.”²⁷

Despite these concerning findings by Professor Goward, it must be noted that the ADF has made a sustained and determined effort over the past ten years to change the culture within defence around the problem of sexual misconduct. This work has led to large improvements in the rate of sexual misconduct in the ADF identified through anonymous surveys, with the ADF currently sitting around 5.7% compared to the civilian rate of 20% in civilian workplaces.²⁸ Additionally research by Professor Pru Goward and the IGADF found in comparison to civilian organisations “the ADF is quicker to finalise sexual offences and fewer complaints are withdrawn than in the civilian criminal system.”²⁹

While I am glad that Lt. Gen. Morrison decided to act in the case of the “Jedi Council” sex scandal, where ADF members were distributing explicit and degrading images of women via email, there are accounts that this happened only after the media became involved.³⁰ Because of the leader

24. Ibid.

25. Inspector General of the ADF, “Own-Initiative Inquiry. Implementation of Military Justice Arrangements for Dealing With Sexual Misconduct in the Australian Defence Force,” 21 November 2021, <https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-03/IGADF-Report.pdf>

26. Ibid. Finding 10, Finding 15.

27. Ibid. Executive Summary, paragraph 15.

28. Ibid. Executive Summary, paragraph 5.

29. Ibid. Finding 9.

30. Ross Eastgate, “David Morrison must take responsibility over army sexual abuse allegations and resign as Australian of the Year,” *The Courier Mail*, 7 Feb 2016, www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/david-morrison-must-take-responsibility-over-army-sexual-abuse-allegations-and-resign-as-australian-of-the-year/news-story/30968c74c32ae58a1dfd694905851a8f.

that Lt. Gen. Morrison has shown himself to be, I am sure that the delay in the handling of the “Jedi Council” scandal and subsequent video was not because of a lack of concern for the victims, but rather is a symptom of the current opacity of ADF processes in regards to issues of this kind. Such an occurrence by military members speaking out to the media is rare because it is illegal for ADF members to speak to the media. This can then lead to the situation where there is no genuine appetite to change the unofficial culture of “covering things up,” as there is no effective external oversight of how the ADF handles problematic or abusive behaviours.³¹

Regarding courage of all forms, there needs to be a balance for both physical and moral courage. Too much physical courage can make a military member reckless and put their life and those of their squad mates at unnecessary risk. Too little physical courage is a form of cowardice and likewise puts a member’s squad mates at further risk, as they cannot rely upon the member to have their back. As with physical courage, there also needs to be a balance in regards to moral courage. A potential example of too much moral courage would be the acts of Julian Assange, who claims to be holding military actions to account, but has done it in such a way as to endanger countless people through his actions by revealing the identity of undercover operatives to our enemies. Conversely, turning a blind eye to sexual harassment in the workplace is an example of too little moral courage, as perpetrators may be emboldened or even accidentally encouraged to move on to more serious acts of sexual assault, clearly increasing the harm to the victims. One way of judging if we have achieved the right balance for the extremes of courage is to look at the harm the actions place upon others—particularly those who are vulnerable and in need of extra protection. If our actions harm others who require protection, then the balance required for acts of courage is wrong.

When teaching a class at the Australian Defence College a few years ago a student made the insightful comment about moral courage that as Defence members “we would happily fall on a grenade and lose our life to save a mate on the battlefield, but we wouldn’t risk our career by standing up and doing the right thing and showing moral courage.” That comment

31. “Uniform Justice: Telegraph campaign to end defence abuse of women,” *Daily Telegraph*, 07 May 2022, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/uniform-justice-telegraph-campaign-to-end-defence-abuse-of-women/>. For further information on this concept, please see my previous research on this topic <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/handle/1959.4/58006>.

highlighted for me a problem with moral courage in military organisations. If our soldiers, sailors and aviators die as a result of showing physical courage they are given a warrior's funeral and their family is looked after by the ADF, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), Legacy and numerous other ex-service organisations. It is truly horrible that they have died, but they are seen to have made the ultimate sacrifice and we see their actions as noble. On the other hand, if a Defence member shows moral courage by standing up against wrongful behaviour perpetrated by their peers, or worse, by their chain of command, then they are often ostracised, punished, and bullied. It costs the individual dearly in terms of career (promotions and deployments are rarely given to those perceived to be "troublemakers"), health, including mental health, and strained or fractured relationships.³²

If our leaders demand moral courage from soldiers, sailors and aviators but do not recognise or reward it and if those who show moral courage are instead punished or left to protect themselves from those whose actions are anathema to Defence values, then this sends a very clear message that although moral courage is in our list of values, it is not meaningfully valued. This tension between words and actions also sends the message that showing moral courage just is not worth the personal cost, especially if everyone around you and above you is looking the other way.

What happens when individuals fail to show moral courage?

When individuals fail to show moral courage, and thus do not stand up and do the right thing, they have an increased risk of mental health issues including depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder and moral injury. Much has been written in recent years on moral injury, so I will not go over it here, however I wish to highlight that research on moral injury has found that the impact of "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (i.e. much of what we would define as a failure of moral courage), have a "lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioural, and social impact."^{33,34,35} In this way we can see that when individuals fail

32. Adavies. "Whistleblower waits for apology," 12 March 2012, www.couriermail.com.au/news/whistleblower-waits-for-apology/news-story/d6a536b0cc7018e2e5b8bd229a4b2815.

33. Timothy Hodgson, and Lindsay Carey. "Moral Injury and Definitional Clarity: Betrayal, Spirituality and the Role of Chaplains," *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 4 (2017): 1212–1228.

34. Nikki Coleman, "Moral Status and the Re-Integration Process,," in *Moral Injury: Unseen Wounds in an Age of Barbarism*, ed. Tom Frame (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2015), pp. 205–219.

35. Brett Litz, et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary

to show moral courage, they increase the chance of negative mental health outcomes (including moral injury), for themselves, those they work with and for those they command.

When individuals fail to show moral courage, it can also undermine the moral reputation of a whole unit or even whole military organisation. In 2019 an Australian Navy Exchange Officer was convicted in Australia of “abusing his public office,” for his role in the Fat Leonard scandal whilst posted as an exchange officer with the US Navy’s 7th Fleet.³⁶ The Fat Leonard situation was an example of endemic corruption, which occurred when senior naval officers in the 7th Fleet were among other things passing classified operational information to the logistics company Glenn Defense Marine Asia and in particular to the CEO of GDMA Leonard Glenn Francis (known widely as Fat Leonard).³⁷ This information was passed along in return for bribes of money, luxury gifts, prostitutes and lavish parties. The Fat Leonard scandal has been named as “perhaps the worse national-security breach of its kind to hit the Navy since the end of the Cold War” because of the impact of the release of classified operational material to a civilian contractor with no need to receive the information.³⁸ In 2008 the Australian Exchange Officer was posted to the 7th Fleet as Australia’s Navy liaison officer and soon became aware of another US Navy officer leaking information to Fat Leonard. Instead of reporting this breach to his US and Australian chains of command, this exchange officer was recruited to also provide classified information, even going as far as creating a fake email address to get around US Navy computer system firewalls. The actions of naval officers such as this exchange officer and the dozens more US Navy officers involved cast a shadow on the reputation of thousands of US Naval officers, and that of both the 7th Fleet and the US Navy as a whole.

Whilst it is easy to apportion blame to the individual officers for not doing the right thing, if the culture within the US Navy’s 7th fleet, or even within the ADF, had been one where the moral courage for calling out wrongful behaviour was rewarded, then this situation of widespread cor-

Model and Intervention Strategy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (December 2009): 700, 697.

36. Alexandra Back, “Fat Leonard scandal: Australian Navy lieutenant commander avoids jail,” *The Canberra Times*, 14 Feb. 2019, www.canberratimes.com.au/story/5995232/fat-leonard-scandal-australian-navy-lieutenant-commander-avoids-jail.

37. Cid Standifer, “Timeline: Fat Leonard Case,” U.S. Naval Institute, 16 Mar. 2017, <https://news.usni.org/2017/03/16/timeline-fat-leonard-case>.

38. Craig Whitlock, “The man who seduced the 7th Fleet,” *The Washington Post*, 27 May, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/sf/investigative/2016/05/27/the-man-who-seduced-the-7th-fleet/.

ruption would probably not have been able to grow to the size that it did. Individual rogue military members taking bribes and passing on classified sensitive information is much more easily identified and stamped out when the prevailing culture is that of encouraging, recognising and rewarding those who show moral courage by being upstanding against such blatantly illegal behaviour. Imagine if instead of initially feeling pressured to turn a blind eye to the Fat Leonard scheme, the Australian exchange officer had known that if they called out such corruption that they would be supported by their chain of command in the U.S. Fleet and Royal Australian Navy. If Australia had a way of encouraging, recognising and rewarding such outstanding moral courage, we would be praising the upstanding behaviour of the exchange officer as an example of a military member living up to the value of courage (as well as that of integrity) rather than being embarrassed by the actions of an exchange officer.

While individual actions can impact negatively on the reputation of an organisation, when individuals stand up and show moral courage it can encourage others to step forward and show moral courage themselves. A recent example of this is the public testimony of White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson. Her testimony before the United States Select Committee on the January 6 Attack inspired other more senior White House staff to come forward and give private testimony to the committee.³⁹ In the face of enormous public vitriol towards her personally, Cassidy Hutchinson's steps to tell the truth about what happened on 6 January 2020 were a shining example of moral courage, especially since it came at enormous cost to herself.

Another example of an individual showing enormous moral courage which brought about profound change, was the actions Captain Ian Fishback (later promoted to Major). Whilst stationed in Iraq with the US Army, Fishback tried to raise concerns regarding the treatment of detainees with his chain of command, but was largely ignored for more than seventeen months. Eventually in 2005, Fishback wrote to Senator John McCain which led to anti-torture legislation, the Detainee Treatment Act, bringing about a dramatic change in the way in which detainees were treated in Iraq and elsewhere.⁴⁰ The actions of individuals such as Cassidy Hutchinson and Ian Fishback in speaking up for the truth should be commended as brave acts

39. Robert Draper, "Cassidy Hutchinson: Why the Jan. 6 Committee Rushed Her Testimony," *The New York Times*, 10 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/10/us/politics/cassidy-hutchinson-jan-6-testimony.html>.

40. Ian Fishback, "A Matter of Honor," *The Washington Post*, 28 Sept. 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/27/AR2005092701527.html>

of moral courage at enormous personal cost, but should also not be necessary if more people working alongside them also showed moral courage to speak up when behaviours and situations are unacceptable.

What happens when organisations fail to show moral courage?

When military organisations fail to show moral courage, it has a profound impact on individual military members. In particular, the unfortunate practice of covering up sexual abuse in military organisations has a significant impact on a large number of military women and men.⁴¹ One member who contacted me when they heard I was writing this paper stated: “For me, the assaults were less painful than the cover-ups and how people treated me.”⁴² The covering up of abuse whilst problematic on its own, also leads to the victim being ostracised by their peers, compounding the harm done by the original perpetrator. This situation could be reduced and potentially eliminated if military organisations adopted more transparent and robust processes for dealing with unacceptable behaviour and abuse, and more robust systems for removing from the military those found guilty of these actions. The common use of “admin action” by commanders to deal with those found guilty of unacceptable behaviour and abuse leads to the situation where outcomes against perpetrators are neither transparent nor consistent and can potentially be used to cover up unacceptable behaviour. This situation has been noted in the research by James Connor and Ben Wadham, who found that “the effects of a closed system that perpetuates administrative violence against members can be a contributing factor in veterans self-harming” and that administrative processes are “used to further traumatise victimised members . . . (creating a) second assault.”⁴³

From a military ethics perspective what is even worse than the cover-up of abuse is when the perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions in any meaningful way and are subsequently promoted to positions of authority.⁴⁴ Whilst it is shocking enough to have someone who has been

41. Ian Austen, “Canada’s Military, Where Sexual Misconduct Went to the Top, Looks for New Path,” *The New York Times*, 30 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/30/canada-military-sexual-misconduct.html>.

42. Anonymised correspondence and discussions conducted by secure video chat. The author of the comment has requested that their identity remain private.

43. James Connor and Ben Wadham, “Royal commission delivers damning interim report on defence and veteran suicide. Here’s what happens next,” *The Conversation*, 12 Aug. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/royal-commission-delivers-damning-interim-report-on-defence-and-veteran-suicide-heres-what-happens-next-188579>.

44. Jessica McSweeney, “Abusers become the bosses: Top brass ignore damning Defence

found guilty of serious unacceptable behaviour being promoted, what makes this situation unfathomable to those outside of military organisations, is that by being promoted those who have been found to have perpetrated abuse are then responsible for holding others accountable for serious unacceptable behaviour. This situation then sets up the perfect climate for the perpetuation of abuse and cover-ups.⁴⁵

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide heard evidence in 2021 that it has been a common perception by members putting in submissions that perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions in any meaningful way.⁴⁶ Additionally, it heard that victims of these abusers were often ostracised from their peers for reporting the abuse and suffered retribution in the form of limited deployments and promotions because the victims were seen as “the problem” for making an official complaint. The Royal Commission also heard that because of the unusual way in which the ADF interprets the Privacy Act (1988), members often do not know the final outcome of their complaint. Outcomes are also not able to be disclosed to other affected persons, such as witnesses as well as small units and teams where the unacceptable behaviour has been common knowledge.⁴⁷ This differing interpretation of the Privacy Act means that the reputation of the victim is unable to be restored, and if false information is circulated by the perpetrator or by those in positions of authority who have attempted to cover up the unacceptable behaviour, there is no right of reply for those who are negatively impacted by this false information. While this may also be the case in other government organisations, this interpretation of the Privacy Act has a disproportionate impact on military victims of abuse, because they are not permitted to speak to the media or join a union who might advocate on their behalf. Their only effective redress is to leave defence or complain to the IGADF, which has a potential perception of not being fully independent of the ADF, as it is staffed by uniformed ADF members. This lack of robust external oversight of “HR processes” within Defence creates the perfect situation for the potential to cover up unacceptable behaviour and abuse. The problems of a lack external oversight over how the ADF manages its people may be why the Royal Australian Navy has recently

report,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June 2022, https://www.defencelivesmatter.com/_files/ugd/c5f951_de5c12b0e50242338330e3db3aca9309.pdf.

45. Ibid.

46. “Interim Report, Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide,” accessed 20 Aug. 2022, https://defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2022-08/interim_report.pdf.

47. Commonwealth of Australia, Privacy Act 1988 (Cth), No. 119, 1988.

introduced the specialisation of Maritime Human Resource Manager in order to ensure ADF policies are applied in a consistent manner, thus also providing an internal oversight of these policies.

Compounding the harm of unacceptable behaviour and abuse, when a military organisation fails to show moral courage in the face of abuse of its members, it additionally loses the respect of the community and struggles to recruit and retain members.⁴⁸ When an organisation claims that courage, especially moral courage, is one of its core values, but then on occasion turn a blind eye to the cover-up of unacceptable behaviour, including abuse, then that organisation is only paying lip service to courage as a value, and is perceived within society to not be committed to the cultural change that it is claiming to undertake.

Whilst there is a perception that ADF efforts to improve how it handles unacceptable behaviour may be stalled, the work of Professor Goward and the IGADF in examining how processes may be improved is a very promising sign of significant work in this area. Additionally legal changes outside of the ADF in regards to workplace health and safety laws may create further legal responsibilities for the ADF to bring forward change. On 09 August 2022, the Department of Defence was charged with breaching the Commonwealth work health and safety laws for “allegedly failing to manage psychological risks in relation to the death of a worker.”⁴⁹ The fact that Comcare has decided to hold the ADF accountable for psychological safety in regards to the death of a member, combined with new workplace health and safety regulations from Safe Work Australia, places a responsibility on Defence to “eliminate or minimise psychological risks so far as is reasonably practicable.”⁵⁰ By the very nature of being a military organisation, some of the core work conducted on operations by the ADF will have psychological risks that the ADF will not be able to eliminate. In order to be an effective fighting force, our members will be required to use lethal force. Thousands of years of war fighting have repeatedly shown that having to use lethal force has negative mental health outcomes on the members involved. These negative mental health outcomes can be

48. Department of Defence, *Submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, Inquiry into the Recruitment and Retention of Australian Defence Force Personnel*, May 2001, 11.

49. “Defence charged over death of RAAF member,” Australian Government, Comcare, last modified 09 Aug. 2022, <https://www.comcare.gov.au/about/news-events/news/defence-charged-over-death-of-raaf-member>.

50. “Model Work Health and Safety Regulations,” *Safe Work Australia*, last modified 14 April 2022, <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/model-whs-regulations>.

mitigated to a degree by training members to be mentally resilient and by providing extensive psychological and pastoral care to affected members, but it is important to note that the psychological risk involved in war fighting cannot be eliminated entirely.

However, the new work health and safety regulations call for reducing and eliminating (as much as practical) psychological harm from “bullying, harassment, discrimination, aggression and violence,” which are not a requirement for war fighting and thus not exempt under the workplace health and safety laws.⁵¹ With regard to the new regulations, Safe Work Australia has gone further by placing a “positive duty to protect” members and employees on organisations.⁵² Defence cannot argue that it is not aware of the impact that unacceptable behaviour and abuse has on Defence members. For example, James Connor and Ben Wadham have stated very publicly that based on their research “institutional abuse is a significant issue in the ADF. The hierarchical and closed character of the military provides environments where service personnel can harass and bully each other.”⁵³

The ADF is at a crossroads where the impact of preventable psychological harm on soldiers, sailors, and aviators will be prosecuted, as the ADF now has a positive legal duty to eliminate or minimise psychological risk. The ADF can either change the processes that allow this harm to occur (and which allow it to be covered up), or we will have new processes forced upon us, potentially as outcomes from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, or through increased oversight by Safe Work Australia. Changing our process around how we deal with unacceptable behaviour and abuse is an important first step in our responsibilities to protect our members from psychological harm. However, rewarding and encouraging moral courage in calling out these unacceptable behaviours and abuse before they are too extreme would have a much more profound impact on the culture that is currently causing psychological harm (as identified by the work of Connor and Wadham).⁵⁴

51. “New model WHS Regulations and Code of Practice to help prevent psychological harm at work.,” *Safe Work Australia*, Last modified 02 Aug. 2022, <https://www.safework-australia.gov.au/media-centre/news/new-model-whs-regulations-and-code-practice-help-prevent-psychological-harm-work>.

52. Ibid.

53. James Connor and Ben Wadham, “Royal commission delivers damning interim report on defence and veteran suicide. Here’s what happens next,” *The Conversation*, 12 Aug. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/royal-commission-delivers-damning-interim-report-on-defence-and-veteran-suicide-heres-what-happens-next-188579>.

54. Ibid.

What is the role of ADF chaplains in regard to moral courage?

In general terms, the role of a support chaplain is to provide support and pastoral care to all, to provide advice to command (in particular ethical advice), and to provide ceremonial and religious services where appropriate. Thus, the chaplain is in a unique position of trust to leaders as well as to soldiers, sailors and aviators. The chaplain often not only supports those going through difficult times, but also advocates for them to command and to the wider ADF if required. Alongside this, the chaplain's role in providing ethical advice to command gives them the unique role of being considered the conscience of the ADF. When troubled with moral questions, ADF members are often directed to talk things through with the chaplain, often starting the discussion with "Padre, what should I do?" Additionally, while everyone in the ADF is called to do the right thing and live by Defence values, the role morality of chaplains requires that they are held to a higher standard in relation to those values.⁵⁵ The role of the chaplain in regard to moral courage is to assist members of all ranks to reflect on what moral courage is and to guide them when they are wrestling with difficult decisions which require them to show moral courage. In order to have the moral authority to fulfill this role, each chaplain must have a deep understanding of what moral courage is and must also show that moral courage in practice. Chaplains cannot "preach" about moral courage if they do not show it at moments when it truly counts. Charles Marshall has argued that integrity is "doing the right thing when no one else is looking," and "doing the right thing no matter what it costs you."⁵⁶ It is not an exaggeration to say that in all military organisations, there is always someone watching what you are doing—the watcher might not be right on your shoulder, but the actions of chaplains (both positive and negative) are discussed in messes and wardrooms all around the world. For this reason, it is vitally important that chaplains not only give good advice on moral courage, but also that they show moral courage when it counts, even when it is going to cost them personally.

What happens when chaplains get it wrong in regard to moral courage?

When individuals fail to show moral courage, they can morally injure themselves and others; the same applies to chaplains. Because of the trusted

55. Stephen Coleman, *Military Ethics: An Introduction with Case Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 38–39.

56. Charles Marshall, *Shattering the Glass Slipper: Destroying Fairy-Tale Thinking Before It Destroys You* (Sindhi(M): Prominent Publishing, 2002), 142, 143.

role that chaplains have, when they fail to show moral courage, the impact is far greater than if they were a regular soldier, sailor or aviator. We can see this clearly in the various reports from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.⁵⁷ The Royal Commission found that the harm caused by the sexual abuse was magnified by those who either knew about it but did nothing, or by those who actively covered up the abuse, particularly those who were ministers, pastors and priests. Many decades of research has shown that those who are believed when they report their sexual abuse have much better mental health outcomes than those who are turned away from help, even if the abuse stops.^{58, 59, 60} If a trusted person such as a chaplain fails to take action to protect the victim and stop the abuser from continuing to harm others, the victim's trauma from the initial abuse is compounded. Additionally when the perpetrator is a member of the clergy (such as a chaplain), and the person who has turned a blind eye or actively covered up the abuse is also a member of the clergy, the harm inflicted upon the victim is compounded due to the particular position of trust that clergy and chaplains hold in the wider community and also in our military organisations. Any failure of moral courage in chaplains when responding to the needs of military members, in particular those military members reporting sexual abuse, potentially multiplies the harm of the original abuse.

While the harm inflicted on individuals when chaplains fail to show moral courage is problematic, it is the wider impact that these actions (or lack of actions) have that is much more damaging to the wider community. Because of the special position of trust within the organisation, a failure of moral courage by individual chaplains leads to the erosion of confidence in all chaplains within the military, thus reducing the capability that chaplains provide. Additionally, the failure of moral courage by a chaplain erodes the implicit contract those chaplains have with their military organisation. If

57. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Volume 7. Improving institutional responding and reporting*, 2017, accessed 24 Aug. 2022, https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_7_improving_institutional_responding_and_reporting.pdf.

58. Victoria Follette et. al. 1994. "Mental Health and Law Enforcement Professionals: Trauma History Psychological Symptoms and Impact of Providing Services to Child Sexual Abuse Survivors," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 25(3), 275–82.

59. Beth Brodsky, and Barbara Stanley. "Adverse childhood experiences and suicidal behavior." *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 31, no. 2 (2008): 223–235.

60. David Fergusson, et al. "Exposure to childhood sexual and physical abuse and adjustment in early adulthood." *Child abuse & neglect* 32, no. 6 (2008): 607–619.

chaplains as a group become unreliable in regard to moral courage, we run the risk of becoming irrelevant and unnecessary to the military organisations in which we serve. To maintain our trusted space within military organisations, chaplains need to show moral courage when it counts the most, even if it is at a cost to ourselves.

Conclusion

Military organisations need to find a way to recognise, incentivise, and reward members for showing moral courage. Until organisations are able to take this step, serious consideration should be given to taking the concept of moral courage out of the various values statements which military members are expected to uphold. Leaving the term “courage” in statements of values, while punishing those who show this value rather than rewarding them, undermines the cultural change military organisations are trying to make in this area. Each military organisation needs to reflect on the question: “How can we hold our members to a standard that we as an organisation are not willing to uphold?”

This article was previously accepted for publication with the Australian Army Chaplaincy Journal. The week before publication it was removed from the journal by the Chief of Army because “this is not the narrative we want in the Australian Army,” thus highlighting the need for moral courage and ethical leadership.