



**A Tactical Ethic: Moral Conduct
in the Insurgent Battlespace**

By Dick Couch

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Reviewed by

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There probably is no better writer in the country to address the important subject of ethical and moral conduct on the insurgent battlefield than Dick Couch, a Naval Academy graduate who served in Vietnam with the Navy SEALs and later taught ethics at the Academy after a career in the Central Intelligence Agency. While a platoon leader with SEAL Team One in Vietnam, he led one of the few successful prisoner of war rescues of that conflict. Couch addressed aspects of the topic of ethics in the military in three previous works: *Chosen Soldier: The Making of a Special Forces Warrior* (Three Rivers Press, 2008), *The Sheriff of Ramadi: Navy SEALs and the Winning of al-Anbar* (Naval Institute Press, 2008), and *The Warrior Elite: The Forging of SEAL Class 228* (Three Rivers Press, 2003). His current offering, *A Tactical Ethic*, is significant because it brings this discourse directly to the genre of conflict found on our battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan and to the actions of our Soldiers, Marines, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) responsive to the insurgent threat.

The message of this slim volume is simple: the two strands

of a unit's technical competence and its moral compass are equally critical, with the moral health reflected in the actions and words of our junior leaders possibly more important to combat effectiveness—especially in the insurgent environment, where the war is waged and won at the small unit level and the target is not the insurgent, but the trust and support of the local population.

Couch presents his thesis through a rational and highly readable discourse on the process of building and maintaining integrity and a culture of moral strength in the Army, Marine Corps, and SOF. While maintaining that the great majority of our forces are highly motivated and morally well grounded, he acknowledges that there have been instances of extremely bad behavior that undermine and subvert efforts to maintain discipline and support right conduct in critical operations in the insurgent environment. Couch identifies a phenomenon that we have all seen firsthand or been aware of: an aggressive and proficient natural leader hijacks or pirates a group within the unit to his own ends, subverting its effectiveness and corrupting its values. The framework of this discourse is to understand why this happens and to ensure that training and leadership within these units address the problem and redress its effects.

The training regimen within each of the Services is addressed and compared in terms of the focus of each in developing mental toughness and a moral centerline that will withstand the rigors of combat and battlefield pressures and uncertainty. Each training regime gets high marks. Weighted with these highly effective training packages are not only the cultural pressures and baggage reflected in the history, upbringing, and lingering old values of each individual Soldier, SEAL, or

Marine, but also the climate of the unit and the social pressures to conform and sometimes to accede to bad behavior. This can be especially critical, according to Couch, in the window between the completion of training and the eve of the first deployment.

As Couch points out, conduct is largely governed by the culture of the unit. That culture and its development begin in the training commands. The current practice of assigning our best to these commands is critical to initial development of correct values and a clear understanding of why good judgment and proper, disciplined actions are key to unit effectiveness in areas such as Afghanistan, where the goodwill of the local populace is imperative. Unfortunately, a few corrosive individuals within a squad or platoon can hijack a unit and sap its effectiveness. Strong leadership must be exercised not to tolerate these behaviors. Indeed, this direction need not come just from the designated leaders; it is equally effective and important coming from de facto leaders within a small unit with the moral courage to step forward—often extremely difficult to do in close-knit units where loyalty trumps all. In these circumstances, the actions of unit and de facto leaders must reflect the values-based conduct that is a key element and an essential part of the warrior ethos and its training. When Marines or Soldiers understand that their responses to everyday circumstances are as important as their conduct on the battlefield, their leadership has matured, and it becomes more difficult for pirates to gain traction within these units.

The rules of ethics (ROE) that Couch addresses at the conclusion of this text are common-sense guidelines. In explaining the truism that ground combat unit members cannot perform up to expectations if those expecta-

tions are not clearly defined, he urges all unit leaders to reflect on the fact that a clear understanding by unit members of moral expectations is as critically important as tactical training. Similarly, he notes that today's warriors closely watch their leaders and that leadership by example cannot be oversold. He states persuasively that good leaders must have a sounding board and that growth in cohesion of a unit is closely tied to effective communication among its members. Likewise, he points out that alcohol usage is different for different troops, but that a leader must know his men and understand the line between recreation and addiction. Most important, the abstinence rule on deployment, and always in the battlespace, must be clear and enforced. The boredom rule demands that unit members be constantly engaged so that they are neither uninformed nor misled on unmet expectations, whether as to the possibility of nonengagement or lack of tactical challenges. Similarly, the recognition and intolerance rules are flip sides of each other. Effective and positive role models must be recognized just as definitively as those exhibiting negative values must be neutralized. In the same vein, leaders must be clear that wrong action on the battlefield is a form of disloyalty. Finally, all small unit leaders must be taught and encouraged to exhibit the courage of their convictions and to follow through on those convictions, however difficult. This is the most difficult of the ROEs, but the most important.

A Tactical Ethic is not a preachy book, but rather a comprehensive and personal review of what each of us knows and needs to be reminded of from time to time. When I had a platoon in Vietnam with the Third Marines in 1968–1969, I had each of the personality types addressed in this text. I admit I enjoyed