

The Character to Lead:  
A Grounded Theory Ethnography of Character in U.S. Army Combat Leaders

by

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## ABSTRACT

After decades of dormancy, character is re-emerging as an important research topic among organizational leadership researchers in response to the need to better explain the source of certain exemplary and ethical leader performance (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Leonard, 1997; Thompson & Riggio, 2010; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). However, efforts to operationalize character are criticized for their abstract and idealistic trait-based conceptualizations that fail to capture the reality of leadership and situational dynamics (Conger & Hollenbeck, 2010). The purpose of this study is to develop a more robust theoretical approach to character that is empirically grounded in the real life complexities of leadership.

Combat provides the context for this study because the adversity of such an extreme context tends to make character a more salient and readily observable phenomenon than in more conventional organizational contexts (Wright & Quick, 2011; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009). I employed an ethnographic grounded theory design to gain a unique insider's perspective absent in many studies of leader character (Charmaz, 2009; Parry & Meindl, 2002). Data collection involved (1) physically embedding for six months with U.S. Army small unit infantry leaders operating in combat in Afghanistan; (2) participant observation in the full range of combat activities engaged in by these leaders; and (3) in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants.

An important contribution of this study is that the emergent concept of leader character is fully situated in the leader's social and environmental context represented by the leader's inner struggle to resist the adversity of combat and uphold the standards of

leadership. In this dialectical framework, certain agentic resources important to resolving this inner struggle emerge as the locus of leader character. This agency-based concept of character is rooted in the internalization of the standards of leadership through identity-conferring normative commitments and entails particular motivational and volitional capacities. These produce a distinct mode of functioning—a strong form of personal moral agency—characterized by the leader’s willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards in the face of adversity. This primacy of leader agency over adversity is the hallmark of leader character—what I call the character to lead.

## DEDICATION

To my beloved wife Roberta Jayne:

You gave me strength when I was weak;

You gave me hope when I despaired;

You were my grace when I was lost;

You have shown me *the character to love*.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	xiv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
Positive Leadership and Extraordinary Leader Performance .....	8
Behavioral Characteristics .....	9
Inherent Dichotomy .....	10
Prevailing Trait-Based Approach to Leader Character .....	12
Two Ideal Character Types .....	13
Virtues and Character Strengths .....	13
Limitations .....	15
Narrow Emphasis on Traits .....	15
Narrow Focus on Moral Character .....	16
Neglect Situated Nature of Character .....	18
Summary .....	20
Towards Integrative Approach to Leader Character .....	21
Self-Identity .....	21
Moral Identity .....	22
Self-Awareness .....	23

CHAPTER	Page
Subjective Self.....	23
Character and Self-Regulation.....	24
Self-Determination .....	25
Self-Regulatory Focus.....	26
Summary.....	28
3 CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	30
Approach to Theory Building.....	30
Interpretive Approach .....	30
Middle Range Theory .....	30
Research Questions .....	31
Guiding Research Question.....	32
Secondary Research Questions.....	33
Internalization of Character .....	33
Externalization of Character .....	36
Towards an Integrative Concept of Leader Character .....	37
4 METHODOLOGY .....	40
Grounded Theory and Research Design.....	40
Ethnographic Approach .....	41
Research Site Selection .....	42
Embedding.....	43



CHAPTER	Page
Theoretical Sampling and Saturation.....	45
Data Collection.....	46
Participant Observation.....	47
Establishing Rapport and Trust.....	50
Interviews .....	51
Implicit Meaning.....	52
Data Analysis .....	54
Initial Field Coding From Notes.....	54
Memo Writing.....	55
Introspective Analysis.....	56
Post-Embed Data Analysis. ....	56
Axial Coding .....	57
Selective Coding.....	57
Data Trustworthiness .....	58
Credibility.....	61
Confirmability .....	61
Dependability .....	62
Transferability .....	62
Research Tradeoffs .....	62
5 FINDINGS: THE CHARACTER TO LEAD .....	63
Emergent Conceptual Rendering.....	63

CHAPTER	Page
Framing the Analysis: Dialectical Tension .....	65
Standards of Leadership.....	65
Completing the Mission .....	68
Taking Care of Soldiers.....	69
Leading From the Front .....	71
Summary.....	73
Adversity of Combat.....	74
The Tedium of Combat .....	76
Enduring Monotony .....	76
Coping With Burnout .....	77
Living in Austere Conditions .....	79
Suffering Personal Drama .....	80
The Trauma of Combat .....	81
Suffering the Loss of Friends .....	82
Enduring Fear and Anxiety .....	83
Not Seeing Effects of Missions.....	84
Becoming Demoralized and Disengaged.....	86
Summary.....	87
The Leader’s Inner Struggle .....	88
The Volitional Struggle.....	89
The Normative Struggle.....	91

CHAPTER	Page
The Character to Lead.....	94
The Normative Question.....	94
Introspective Insights .....	96
Normative Commitments.....	101
Identity-Conferring.....	102
Caring About .....	104
Obligation to Duty.....	107
Duty Motive of Competence.....	109
Knowing Your Job .....	110
Exercising Good Judgment .....	111
Being Decisive Under Duress .....	112
Duty Motive of Loyalty .....	113
Putting Soldiers First .....	113
Developing and Training Soldiers .....	114
Knowing and Keeping Tabs on Soldiers .....	115
Duty Motive of Responsibility.....	116
Taking Responsibility.....	116
Stepping Up and Taking Ownership.....	117
Holding Each Other Accountable .....	118
Summary.....	119
Aspiration to Honor.....	119

CHAPTER	Page
Honor Motive of Pride .....	122
Setting High Standards .....	124
Taking It to the Enemy .....	124
Making a Difference .....	125
Leaving It on the Table.....	127
Honor Motive of Loyalty .....	128
Caring About Your Soldiers.....	129
Bringing Everybody Home .....	131
Honor Motive of Respect .....	132
Setting the Example.....	133
Doing the Hard Right .....	134
Putting It on the Line .....	136
Summary .....	136
Volitional Disciplines.....	138
Moral Discipline.....	139
Trusting the Big Picture to Higher Command.....	140
Focusing on the Task at Hand.....	141
Controlling Frustration and Maintaining Positive Bearing .	142
Maintaining Good Working Relationships .....	144
Exercising Restraint.....	146
Summary.....	147

CHAPTER	Page
Practical Discipline.....	149
Fighting Complacency (Prevention Focus) .....	150
Achieving Mastery (Promotion Focus).....	153
Balancing Work and Rest (Balance Focus). ....	155
Summary.....	160
Summary Empirical Observations.....	161
The Normative Question Revisited .....	165
6 DISCUSSION.....	167
Framing the Analysis: Leader Agency and the Dialectics of Character ....	168
The Normative Struggle: Internalization of the Standards of Leadership..	173
Standards of Leadership.....	173
The Normative Struggle.....	176
Normative Commitments.....	179
Identified Regulation: Caring About the Practice of Leadership .....	182
Integrated Regulation: Identity-Conferring Commitment to the Practice of Leadership.....	184
Characteristic Motivations .....	187
Obligation to Duty.....	188
Aspiration to Honor.....	189
Motivation to Lead .....	190

CHAPTER	Page
Motivational Hierarchy .....	191
The Normative Question Revisited .....	194
The Volitional Struggle: Externalization of Standards of Leadership .....	196
Adversity of Combat .....	197
The Volitional Struggle.....	199
The Volitional Discipline.....	203
Practical and Moral Volitional Disciplines.....	204
Practical Discipline Regulatory Focus .....	206
Moral Discipline Regulatory Focus .....	207
Volitional Autonomy and Integrity .....	210
Integrity of Responsibility.....	211
Integrity of Pride.....	212
Answering the Research Questions .....	214
Internalization of Character .....	217
Standards of Leadership.....	217
Normative Commitment .....	218
Identified Regulation .....	219
Integrated Regulation .....	220
Characteristic Motivations .....	221
Externalization of Character .....	223
Volitional Disciplines.....	224

CHAPTER	Page
The Significance of Character .....	226
Synthesis .....	228
Root Construct of Leader Character .....	230
Socially Embedded.....	232
Environmentally Situated.....	233
Centrality of the Self .....	233
Bringing Influence to Bear.....	234
Implications of Emergent Concept of Leader Character .....	234
Beyond Traits .....	235
Character-Based Motivation to Lead.....	237
Leader Development .....	240
Leader Character and Culture .....	243
Social Influence of Leader Character .....	245
Limitations.....	247
Conclusion .....	250
REFERENCES .....	252
APPENDIX	
A INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL .....	261
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	275

## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
4.1	Data Trustworthiness.....	61



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
5.1	Emergent conceptual rendering of leader character and its significance to the practice of leadership in combat.....	63
5.2	The normative standards governing the practice of combat leadership.....	66
5.3	The adversity of combat .....	75
5.4	Duty motives associated with the normative standards of leadership.....	109
5.5	Honor motives associated with the normative standards of leadership.....	122
5.6	The volitional disciplines to overcome the adversity of combat.....	139
6.1.	Emergent conceptual rendering of leader character and its significance to the practice of leadership in combat.....	168
6.2.	The motivational structure underpinning leaders' normative commitment...	193
6.3.	The volitional disciplines to overcome the adversity of combat.....	205

## Chapter 1

*Field Journal Entry, 15 September 2010.*

It is a few days before Afghanistan's national election. Thirty to 40 well-trained foreign fighters have infiltrated the battlespace to reinforce the local enemy and disrupt the election. The squad with whom I'm embedded is conducting daily foot patrols. Our mission: Draw out and engage the enemy in order to disrupt their ability to disrupt the election. It's working. Today we were ambushed four times. Each was especially intense. The enemy outnumbered us; they understood tactics; they knew how to employ their weapons effectively; and, they did not run away after we returned fire, but stayed and fought. We were evenly matched.

The squad leader I'm observing—call him Staff Sergeant (SSG) K—is one of the best in the troop. He is trusted and respected by his soldiers, his peers, and his superiors alike. I spent three weeks embedded with his squad in July and am here again for more observation. He seems to epitomize the character of the combat leader. Today, SSG K distinguished himself more than is typical even for him. In the first ambush, the enemy hit us while we were setting up a “support by fire” position on a hillside. While under intense enemy fire and with rounds impacting the dirt around him, SSG K low crawled up the hill to get ammunition for the 60mm mortar. Mortars “end firefights” out here. SSG K's actions enabled us to end this one.

After “mission complete” and “return to base,” I sat down with SSG K to interview him. I wanted to get his introspective analysis of his actions. Our discussion lasted more than two hours. When I asked him about the first firefight, here's what he said:

“Anybody who thinks that I wasn't scared during that firefight is out of their [expletive] mind, because I was [expletive] bricks. Low crawling up that hill under fire to get mortar ammo, low crawling to get my weapon and my bag and getting [another soldier's] weapon and his bag for him—just so we can get the [expletive] off that hill and then to get ambushed three more times. But I mean that's just what you got to do. If I'm the senior man on the support by fire position, then I'm the senior man. I have to push myself a little harder. I have to lead from the front.”

This dissertation is inspired by the striking observation that the leaders involved in this study so frequently and consistently demonstrated such extraordinary performance as that illustrated by SSG K. What makes a leader willing to risk his life by low crawling

up a hill under fire in spite of his acute fear? Answering this question is the objective and challenge of this study.

Though the context for this study is combat, the problem of explaining such extraordinary leader performance is not unique to this extreme context. On the contrary, it is a central question in a paradigm of organizational leadership research that was initially inspired by Burns' (1978) concept of transforming leadership and subsequently developed and operationalized into charismatic leadership (House, 1977), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005) and a number of other forms of positive leadership. Though each of these theories focus on a unique aspect of leader performance, each take as their start point individual leaders who demonstrate certain exemplary and ethical behaviors, or what I call extraordinary leader performance. The defining characteristic of such performance is the leader's willingness to transcend his or her own individual self-interests in sacrificing for others and striving to achieve the mission and collective good of their work unit, organization, community or entire society (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). A central concern of leadership researchers is to understand the personal attributes and capacities that explain this extraordinary performance (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). This study contributes to this line of research by focusing on the concept of leader character.

Leader character is long believed to be important if not decisive to leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). After decades of dormancy, character is re-emerging as an important research topic largely in response to the need to better explain the personal

origins of positive leadership and extraordinary leader performance (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Thompson & Riggio, 2010; Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Quick, 2011). However, recent efforts to operationalize character are criticized for their highly abstract and idealistic trait-based conceptualizations that fail to capture the reality of leadership and situational dynamics (Conger & Hollenbeck, 2010). In response, researchers have called for more robust theoretical frameworks that better account for the complex nature of character and the role it plays in leadership (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Sosik & Cameron, 2010). This study responds to this call by developing an agency-based approach to leader character that is empirically grounded in the real life complexities of leadership.

Combat provides the context for this study because the adversity faced by leaders in such an extreme context tends to make character a more salient and readily observable phenomenon than in more conventional organizational contexts (Wright & Quick, 2011; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009). I employed an ethnographic grounded theory design to gain a unique insider's perspective absent in many approaches to leader character (Charmaz, 2009; Parry & Meindl, 2002). Data collection involved (1) physically embedding for six months with U.S. Army small unit infantry leaders operating in combat in Afghanistan; (2) participant observation in the full range of combat activities engaged in by these leaders; and (3) in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants.

The excerpt above from SSG K provides critical insights that help isolate the phenomenon and frame the concept of leader character emergent in this study. In

combat, leaders often find themselves in hard situations acted upon by strong forces they cannot control. Yet in the face of this, leaders of character observed in this study demonstrate the extraordinary capacity to bring personal influence to bear in directing their actions to complete missions and take care of soldiers, even at great personal risk and sacrifice. This strong form of personal moral agency, as I describe it, reflects three distinct performance characteristics that are illustrated in SSG K's actions.

First, leader performance in combat involves resisting and overcoming adversity inherent in the environment of combat. Combat is an environment characterized by permanent and pervasive adversity. Adversity consists of the inexorable forces that stand in the way of efforts to accomplish missions and tasks, take care of soldiers, and otherwise make leading in combat extremely difficult. In his first sentence, SSG K acknowledges a dominant form of adversity in combat—the fear provoked by the enemy threat—when he states, “Anybody who thinks that I wasn’t scared during that firefight is out of their [expletive] mind, because I was [expletive] bricks.” Leading in combat requires that leaders not yield or give in to the effects of fear and other forms of adversity, but remain firm and continue to function in and through them. Thus, leader performance in combat is characterized by resisting and overcoming adversity.

Second, leader performance in combat involves upholding standards associated with the practice of combat leadership. Combat leadership is a social practice governed by certain standards that define what it means to be a combat leader, including notions of conduct that gain a leader merit, praise or honor, as well as conduct that is regarded as bad, wrong or intolerable (MacIntyre, 2007). SSG K refers to these standards when he

says, “If I’m the senior man on the support by fire position, then...I have to lead from the front.” “Lead from the front” is the key phrase. As a standard, it is more than an item on a checklist of behaviors leaders are expected to exhibit. Rather, it represents the guiding beliefs—the underlying values, principles and ideals—that characterize this community of infantry combat leaders. These beliefs are highly normative in that they make strong claims on leaders that obligate them to certain courses of action. This strong normativity is reflected in SSG K’s use of imperative “have to” language—“But I mean that’s just what you [*have*] to do... I *have to* push myself a little harder. I *have to* lead from the front” (emphasis added). Thus, leader performance in combat is characterized by a strong normative commitment to uphold the standards of leadership.

The third key performance characteristic derives from the first two and gets to the heart of extraordinary leader performance in combat. In combat, the moment comes when what leadership demands is *hard*: when the adversity of combat and the standards of leadership clash to demand difficult things of leaders, even that they should be prepared to risk and even sacrifice their lives. The situation SSG K faced in the ambush was hard in this respect. In taking the action to low crawl up the hill under fire, SSG K stands a strong chance of getting shot, wounded, or even killed. This is what leadership in combat demands; it demands that leaders risk and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of the mission and their soldiers.

*The willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards in the face of adversity* captures the signature features of extraordinary leader performance in combat. These performance characteristics reflect a strong form of leader agency. I describe it as *agency*

because it involves the leader bringing influence to bear on himself—on his own functioning, on environmental events as well as on others (Bandura, 1986). It is a form of *personal* and *moral* agency because this influence is exercised individually by the leader and directed towards upholding normative standards of leadership (Bandura, 1986; Brown et al., 2005). And it is a *strong* form of agency because this influence is exercised in the face of countervailing adversity and even at risk of life. The primacy of *leader agency* over adversity constitutes the critical empirical insight that grounds the agency-based concept of leader character emergent in this study—what I call the *character to lead*.

This dissertation unpacks this character to lead to reveal the agentic structures and processes that underpin it. The following chapters outline the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study; present the emergent findings and theoretical model; and discusses the implications for understanding character and its significance to leadership. Specifically, Chapters 2 and 3 provide a theoretical frame by reviewing select literatures relevant to character in leadership and establishing a conceptual foundation for the research questions guiding this study. Chapter 4 then provides a methodological frame by outlining the inductive approach chosen for the study, as well as describing the data collection and analysis methods used. Chapter 5 presents the emergent data and a theoretical model of leader character. In Chapter 6, I conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for theory building, future research, and practical application for the emergent model.

## Chapter 2

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As stated above, the objective of this study is to develop an empirically-based theoretical understanding of character that explains extraordinary leader performance in combat – the willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards in the face of adversity. The problem of explaining extraordinary leader performance is not unique to this study. On the contrary, it actually constitutes a central research topic in organizational leadership studies (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Therefore, this review focuses on how current theory addresses this problem with special focus on character.

This review is organized in three parts. First, I address how extraordinary leader performance is conceptualized in the leadership literature. Next, I examine the prevailing trait-based approach to leader character in explaining extraordinary leader performance with a focus on its limitations. In the final section, I consider concepts that may address these limitations and advance a more holistic and integrative understanding of leader character and its significance to extraordinary leader performance.

The objective of this review is not to provide a comprehensive examination of character and leadership – an enormous task well beyond the scope of this study. Rather, it is to generate an initial set of concepts and issues to frame and focus this study. In the next chapter, I translate the concepts and ideas into general research questions to guide this study.



## **Positive Leadership and Extraordinary Leader Performance**

Over the last few decades, an influential cohort of researchers has advanced a paradigm of leadership known as new-genre leadership (Bryman, 1992). This paradigm was inspired by Burns (1978) and his seminal book *Leadership* which introduced the concept of transforming leadership and was in turn, initially operationalized by House's (1977) charismatic leadership and Bass's (1985) transformational leadership. This paradigm has since expanded to include a number of additional theories, such as authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005), servant leadership (Spears, 2004) and responsible leadership (Waldman & Siegel, 2008). Collectively, I refer to these theories as positive forms of leadership or positive leadership.

Since the emergence of this paradigm, research has focused on several topics that explain different aspects of positive leadership. These topics fall into two broad research trajectories. One trajectory starts with the leader and works outward to identify the leader behaviors associated with positive leadership (e.g., Bas & Riggio, 2006); understand the influence mechanisms and effects these leaders have on followers (e.g., Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993); and measure the impact these leaders have on their teams, unit or organization's performance (e.g., Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003). A second trajectory starts with the leader and works inward to identify the personal attributes and capacities of these leaders (e.g., House & Howell, 1992) and understand how such personal attributes and capacities can be developed (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This study falls within this second trajectory.

**Behavioral characteristics.** Though the positive leadership paradigm consists of a variety of theories, each providing a unique approach to positive leadership, each takes as their start point an individual leader who demonstrates certain exemplary and ethical behaviors, or what I will refer to as *extraordinary leader performance*. The following is a composite of behavioral characteristics associated with this extraordinary leader performance, organized around the four dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999):

- *Leader behaves in ways that serves as a role model (idealized influence):* displays conviction and confidence; willing to take risks and takes stands on difficult issues; instills pride, earns respect and engenders trust; emphasizes the importance of commitment and purpose and setting high standards; guided by internalized moral values/principles; continually-enforces a code of ethical conduct; is aware of ethical consequences of his/her decisions and actions; can be counted on to do the right thing, demonstrating high standards of ethical conduct.
- *Leader behaves in ways that motivates and inspires (inspirational motivation):* demonstrates commitment to goals and shared vision that provides meaning and purpose; communicates expectations that challenges and motivates followers to achieve high standards; displays optimism, enthusiasm and teamwork; focuses on the best in people and provides encouragement for what needs to be done; makes fair and balanced decisions; promotes trust through open, honest communication.
- *Leader behaves in ways that stimulate efforts to be innovative, creative and adaptive (intellectual stimulation):* questions old assumptions, values and beliefs;

seeks differing perspectives when solving problems; analyzes available information before making a decision; stimulates new ways of doing things; and encourages expression of ideas and reasons.

- *Leader behaves in ways that considers individual needs for achievement and growth (individualized consideration):* deals with others as individuals; understands how he/she impacts others; listens attentively and considers individual needs, abilities and aspirations; and counsels, coaches and teaches.

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) describe this extraordinary leader performance as reflecting “ideal moral type” behaviors (p. 191). They describe it as moral because such performance ultimately rests on a “moral foundation of legitimate values” (p. 184). At the core of this moral foundation is a leader who, first and foremost, is concerned for the needs of others and the mission and good of the organization (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Such leaders transcend their own individual self-interests in sacrificing to achieve the mission and collective good of their work unit, organization, community or entire society. This willingness to transcend self-interests and sacrifice for the “common good” is the defining characteristic – the hallmark – of extraordinary leader performance (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999. p. 200; Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

**Inherent dichotomy.** Inherent in extraordinary leader performance is what Burns (1978, p. 46) describes as a “dichotomy” between the leader’s commitment to certain overriding, common good-oriented end-values on the one hand, and the claims of a variety of lesser everyday wants, needs and responsibilities on the other. Burns likens this dichotomy to Max Weber’s distinction between the *ethic of ultimate ends* which

measures a person's behavior by its adherence to good ends or high purposes; and the *ethic of responsibility* which measures a person's behavior by its effectiveness in reconciling competing values, interests and responsibilities.

The threat leaders' face in dealing with this dichotomy is that their commitment to good ends and high purposes associated with the ethic of ultimate ends will be reduced to satisfying the immediate claims of lesser values, interests and responsibilities associated with the ethic of responsibility. This in turn opens the floodgates to expedient and opportunistic leadership because, amidst a plethora of competing interests and claims, the concept of responsibility is stretched to rationalize a narrow focus on serving self-interests alone (Burns, 1978). This kind of rationalized self-serving opportunism accounts for much of the corruption and scandal that has plagued leaders over the last several decades from Watergate to Enron and the recent financial crisis (cf. Heclo, 2008) and also explains much of the impetus behind the positive leadership paradigm (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

For Burns (1978), the great bulk of leadership activity resides in the day-to-day struggle to resolve this dichotomy: amidst a plethora of competing claims of lesser everyday wants and needs, the continuous struggle to avoid rationalizing opportunistic self-serving action and transcend this to serve good ends and high purposes directed towards the common good. The leader's capacity to resolve this dichotomy—to transcend self-interests and serve and even sacrifice for the common good—is ground zero for research on positive leadership. Broadly construed, this capacity is what I mean

by *leader character*. As indicated above, it is the hallmark of extraordinary leader performance and constitutes what Burns' (1978) describes as its ultimate test:

The ultimate test of moral leadership is its capacity to transcend the claims of multiplicity of everyday wants and needs and expectations, to respond to the higher levels of moral development, and to relate leadership behavior – its roles, choices, style, commitments – to a set of reasoned, relatively explicit, conscious values (p. 46).

### **Prevailing Trait-Based Approach to Leader Character**

Character is long believed to be important if not decisive to leadership. In *The Republic*, Plato held up character as the defining qualification of the ruling class. Rulers with character, he argued, were “most likely to devote their lives to doing what they judged to be in the interest of the community” (Lee, 1987, p. 119). Social disintegration was inevitable if rulers failed in this regard. Leader character was thus associated the collective welfare and carried strong moral overtones.

Fast forward to the contemporary study of positive leadership and a similar importance continues to be attached to leader character. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), for example, emphasize that the heart of the “moral enterprise” of leadership is the “good character” of the leader that involves a “commitment to virtue in all circumstances” (p. 196). The moral character of the leader grounded in virtues provides the inner “checks and balances upon power and self-aggrandizement” that is destructive to the social welfare (p. 196). Thus, from the ancient Greek philosophers to modern positive leadership researchers, the importance attached to leader character concerns the fundamental problem of how to prevent the *socially destructive* effects of leadership and promote the *socially constructive* effects.

**Two ideal character types.** From this perspective, leader character is conceptualized generally as a kind of inner socializing influence on the leader – it represents the moral and mental qualities internalized by a leader that ensure that his or her leadership serves social purposes. In the charismatic leadership literature, this composite of moral and mental qualities is described as socialized charismatic leadership (Howell, 1988; House & Howell, 1992). Socialized charismatic leaders are socially constructive, egalitarian, and are oriented towards serving others and the collective interests. By contrast, personalized charismatic leaders are dominant, self-interested, self-aggrandizing and authoritarian and use their power to obtain their followers’ obedience and submission.

Personalized and socialized charismatic leaders represent two ideal types of leaders—also described as authentic transformational versus pseudo-transformational leaders respectively (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). These ideal types are distinguished by their underlying character traits that place them on opposite sides of the dichotomy inherent in extraordinary leadership as described above. They thus capture the basic conceptual scheme underlying approaches to leader character in the positive leadership paradigm.

**Virtues and character strengths.** An extension of the socialized type of leader character that has gained increasing attention from positive leadership researchers focuses on virtues and character strengths (e.g., Riggio, Zhu, Maroosis, & Reina, 2010; Sosik & Cameron, 2010; Wright & Quick, 2011). These researchers adopt taxonomies of virtues

and character strengths as a way of defining the ideal socialized traits that underpin positive forms of leadership.

A popular taxonomy used in these models is Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of virtues and character strengths. This taxonomy includes six core moral virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence—and 24 enabling character strengths thought to define the universal “traits of a good person” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 89). This taxonomy is unique in that, in contrast to traditional virtue-based approaches to character, the focal construct is not virtues, which are considered universal characteristics grounded in biology through evolutionary processes. Rather, the focal construct is character strengths, which are construed as positive traits that underpin the virtues; they are the malleable psychological ingredients—processes or mechanisms—that provide distinguishable self-regulatory routes to displaying the virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that there are two self-regulatory routes or paths to displaying the character strengths: negative and positive. In the negative path, character strengths enable a person to persevere (which in moral matters involves keeping to one's moral commitments) despite obstacles, temptations, or confusing circumstances (Kupperman, 1991). This involves negative forms of volition and moral conation such as willpower, moral discipline, and moral self-control, which involve overriding and restraining base impulses and achieving an absence of moral distress, disorder, or corruption (Baumeister, Gailliot, & Tice, 2009). In the positive path, character strength enables the goal-directed pursuit over time of morally praiseworthy activities important

to moral fulfillment, flourishing, and the good life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This involves positive forms of volition and moral conation such as ego strength, moral courage, moral efficacy, and esteem associated with realizing one's moral commitments. To date, however, researchers adopting this taxonomy of virtues and character strengths have not focused on these positive and negative self-regulatory paths.

**Limitations.** The brief review above of is not intended to be a comprehensive of leader character in the positive leadership literature by any means. Rather, the purpose is simply to sketch the main conceptual thrust of treatments of leader character in this literature. With this background, I now focus in slightly more detail on the limitations associated with this trait-based approach to leader character as a way of identifying issues important for the current study to address. I highlight three significant limitations: a narrow focus on traits, a narrow focus on moral dimension of character, and a neglect of the situated nature of character.

***Narrow emphasis on traits.*** The first key limitation of the trait-centric approach to leader character is that it tends to focus heavily on traits (virtues and character strengths) as the defining element of character and neglect other psychological structures and processes that are also important to character. Many of these models originate from the consulting psychology literature (cf., Sperry, 1999; Thompson & Riggio, 2010). They are thus focused on developing instruments for assessing character useful for executive recruitment and selection. This is an important line of research. However, there is more to being a leader of character than can be inferred from the ability to check the virtuous alternatives on questionnaires administered by psychologists.



Classical as well as emerging philosophical and psychological conceptions recognize character as a complex, dynamic phenomenon and treat it holistically (Lapsley & Power, 2005). Character in this broader more holistic sense is fundamentally concerned with *selfhood*—the qualities by virtue of which a person is oneself (Baumeister, 1987). It implicates both *who a person is* (a person’s sense of self and identity) and *how a person acts* (a person’s characteristic ways of thinking, feeling, and acting). From this perspective, leader character is not limited to traits. It includes a leader’s dominant characteristics but also involves the sense of self and identity as well as the self-regulatory processes that control the way the leader thinks, feels and acts. A leader can be understood to have character in this more holistic sense of selfhood when there is unity between virtues (reflecting the values, principles and ideals of the community), the leader’s self-identity, and the self-regulatory processes that govern his/her actions. Thus, the key limitation of the prevailing trait-based approach to leader character is not that it emphasizes traits (virtues/character strengths) per se, but that it focuses narrowly on traits and neglects how these are internalized and integrated into the leader’s self-identity and self-regulatory processes.

***Narrow focus on moral character.*** The second limitation of trait-centric approach to leader character is that it tends to focus narrowly on the moral aspects of character and neglect other important aspects that are not strictly moral. To be sure, the moral dimension of character is crucial. No leader would be spoken of as having character who did not, on the whole, conduct him- or herself in a way that we considered right or correct (Kupperman, 1991). To emphasize this point, we tend to associate moral

attributes with character: honesty, integrity, courage, etc. These are not just attractive features of someone's personality that are nice to have; they are features of someone's personality that they are expected to have. That is, they are normative: they carry evaluative weight as good, obligatory, or right. In this normative sense, people talk about a person having "moral," "good," or "strong" character and the moral overtones of these attributes underscore the importance of the morality to character.

However, it is important to note that the normative aspect of character is not limited to strictly moral evaluations (Kupperman, 1991). For example, character is frequently invoked in achievement-oriented contexts such as sports (Shields & Bredemeier, 2008). We credit athletes and sports teams for "showing a lot of character" by not folding under pressure and persevering in overcoming adversity to achieve victory. Similarly, we frequently make the claim that adversity "builds character," although we do not usually imply that adversity makes people more moral. Someone can be a weak, lazy, and un-ambitious slug without behaving immorally. These types of achievement-oriented normative evaluations do not normally involve morality, yet they are an important part of our normative understanding of character (Kupperman, 1991). In sum, what we praise and admire in someone's character often will include a broader range of excellences than those that would commonly be placed within the domain of morality (Kupperman, 1991). These non-moral but important achievement-oriented dimensions of character tend to be neglected in highly moralized concepts of leader traits and virtues.

*Neglect situated nature of character.* A third limitation of trait-based approaches to leader character is that they emphasize traits in the abstract without accounting for the complex situated nature of leader character—both its socially embedded and situationally dynamic aspects (Conger & Hollenbeck, 2010). Virtues are recognized as an important aspect of character since Aristotle, but they are contingent on the way of life, the social order and the moral culture of the community in which they are embedded (Hunter, 2000). In short, they require social context to be properly understood in terms of their importance to character.

When properly embedded in social context, virtues become a way of summarizing the ideals of a particular community that define good character. Virtues are in this respect “social traits” that serve a dual purpose (Solomon, 1993, p. 107). On the one hand, they reflect the ideals of a particular community and the excellences of particular social practices (e.g., leadership) in that community; on the other hand, virtues are important aspects of an individual’s character that allow one to “fit in” and excel in the particular social practices in which he or she is engaged. Character thus aligns a person and his sense of selfhood with his social-cultural context by internalizing the social norms and mores of that context. All this is not to deny the individual psychological aspects of character, but merely to recognize that character is as much a function of the social order as it is a manifestation of the individual person (Hunter, 2000). The importance of this social embeddedness is often neglected in prevailing trait-based approaches to leader character.

Furthermore, the environmentally situated nature of character requires that researchers take into consideration situational dynamics. And the situational dynamics most important to leader character is adversity. What a leader does in commonplace situations may be much less indicative of character than what she or he does when severely tempted or pressed. Many of us are not at our best in the face of adversity. What is important to character in such situations is not what people say (or their responses to items on a character assessment instrument), but what they do and in turn, their reasons for doing it.

Among the features of the Milgram (1974) experiments in which subjects were asked to administer what they thought were electric shocks of increasing severity to someone they thought was another experimental subject (who kept giving wrong answers in what was billed as a learning experiment) was that the situation and the decision it called for was under some duress. The researchers maintained a fairly rapid pace; subjects had to make quick decisions and were pressured by the researchers in order to get them to do things that almost certainly would go against the moral code they normally professed. Most complied and administered electric shocks up to a level that (had they been real) would have been highly dangerous.

It is possible that what many of these participants thought they were doing was just playing their part in a scientific experiment managed by people who must know what they are doing. Perhaps if they had had time to think, most would have decided differently. But in real life, decisions and actions are often made by people and especially by leaders who do not have time to think; and this is especially true of leaders

in combat, e.g., SSG K having to make a life-or-death decision in an instant to low crawl up the hill under fire. The situational dynamics of adversity thus separates what Kupperman (2005, p. 201) calls “sunshine soldiers”—people who can be relied upon mainly in stable, favorable circumstances, from real soldiers—people who struggle with adversity but in the end, can be relied upon to find it within themselves to do the right thing even or especially when it’s hard. Burns’ focus on the dichotomy inherent in leadership further underscores this point. The “ultimate test” of leadership is the leader’s day-to-day struggle to transcend the claims of lesser everyday wants, needs and serve good ends and high purposes.

The upshot of all this is that situational dynamics and especially adversity are critical to any understanding of leader character as well as the social context in which the leader is embedded. Trait-based approaches to leader character are limited in their tendency to neglect the complex situated nature of leader character—both its socially embedded and situationally dynamic aspects (Conger & Hollenbeck, 2010).

**Summary.** In sum, prevailing trait-based approaches to leader character are limited in that they neglect both the situated nature of leader character as well as the internalization and integration of character traits/virtues into a leader’s self-identity and self-regulatory processes. They thus fail to capture both the complex internal and external realities of leader character and in doing so create a highly abstract concept of leader character. Kupperman (1991) likens this approach to cardboard cutouts in which tourists can insert their faces and be photographed as the cowboy and the saloon lady. More critically, Conger and Hollenbeck (2010) in their examination of several trait-based

models argue that these approaches create a false idealized impression of leader character that begs the question: “Where can we find such remarkable individuals?” (p. 312).

### **Towards Integrative Approach to Leader Character**

In response to these limitations, researchers have called for more robust frameworks for understanding the complex nature of character and the role it plays in leadership (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Sosik & Cameron, 2010). Sperry (1999) for example emphasizes the need for “an integrative operational model of character and its components that can be systematically studied” (p. 215). Hannah & Avolio (2011) similarly argue that the concept of character needs to be unpacked so that the “field of leadership has a clearer starting point for advancing both theory and research on what constitutes leader character” (p. 979). Unpacking leader character in this way so that a more theoretically robust understanding can be developed is an important issue for this study to address.

To this end, to conclude this review, I highlight a few select concepts important for consideration in advancing leader character towards a more holistic and integrative conceptualization. I focus on the internal aspects of leader character neglected in prevailing trait-based approaches. Specifically I focus on self-identity and self-regulation.

**Self-identity.** As indicated above, character has a close relation to *who a person is*. That is, to have character is to be a certain kind of person who attaches importance to particular values, principles and ideals that are self-defining. Trait-based approaches to leader character have paid limited attention to how character implicates a leader’s self-

identity. However, research into the personal origins of positive leadership, such as authentic leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), emphasize the importance of self-identity. This parallels a similar trend in moral psychology that focuses on how character implicates a person's sense of self and identity (Lapsely & Power, 2005). Based on this literature, I highlight three aspects of self-identity that are potentially important to leader character: moral identity, self-awareness and the subjective self. I briefly review these topics below.

***Moral identity.*** Blasi (1995, 2005) introduced a concept of moral identity as a way to explain a fundamental problem in research on moral character and agency: the weak correlation between moral judgment and moral action or what is known as the “judgment-action gap” (Walker, 2004, p. 1). Blasi's model is grounded in Erikson's (1968) work on psychosocial development and identity formation. It involves three key components of character: a moral self-identity emphasizing the importance of moral concerns (moral values and beliefs) to one's self-understanding; a sense of personal responsibility for moral action or what could also be understood moral engagement; and self-consistency or integrity, which is a motive to align moral responsibility with moral action (Blasi, 1995, 2005). This self-consistency motive emerging from a person's moral identity is posited to be the lynchpin to closing the judgment-action gap.

In addition, Blasi's (1995, 2005) concept of the moral self emphasizes the importance of moral commitments to moral identity. Moral commitments are those things—beliefs, principles, relationships, ideals, or ways of living, i.e. values—that we cherish and choose to live by. They are deeply felt desires about the kind of person we

aspire to be that we have reflected on and intentionally chosen. This choice amounts to a kind of personal pledge a person makes with oneself that obligates him or her to become a certain kind of person and live by certain values, beliefs, and principles. One achieves moral identity to the extent that such moral commitments are central to one's self understanding. This yields a character with a strong motivational orientation toward morality (Blasi, 1995, 2005).

***Self-awareness.*** Self-awareness is widely recognized as crucial to development of moral identity and character (Blasi, 2005). In the positive leadership literature, authentic leader development (ALD) incorporates in its model a robust concept of self-awareness (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). The essence of self-awareness is personal insight about “who am I?” gained through self-reflection: by reflecting through introspection, authentic leaders gain clarity and concordance with respect to their core values, identity, emotions, motives and goals (Gardner et al., 2005). When authentic self-awareness is achieved, it entails “awareness of, and trust in, one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions” (Kernis, 2003, p. 13; cited in Gardner et al., 2005, p. 349). This self-awareness provides the leader with a firm anchor for their decisions and actions (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 347).

***Subjective self.*** An important consequence of self-awareness and moral identity is the subjective experience of the self – how the self experiences itself in action. To this end, an important aspect of character strengths is how they affect the self. Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that the experience of character strength engages the subjective aspects of the self. The subjective experience of the self entails a sense of ownership and



authenticity (“this is the real me”) vis-à-vis the strength. It includes: a feeling of excitement while displaying the strength; a sense of yearning to act in accordance with the strength; a feeling of invigoration (as opposed to exhaustion) when using the strength; as well as feelings of subjective well-being (happiness), acceptance of oneself, reverence for life, and similar feelings (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 17-18). Thus, character strength, rather than being a consequence of the self is thought to be intrinsic to and constituent of the subjective self.

In sum, the three aspects of self-identity—moral identity, self-awareness and the subjective self—are each important psychological concepts related to the internalization and integration of values, principles and ideals associated with character. Notable in the brief analysis above is not only how the self-identity is implicated, but also how this has significant implications for behavior. The development of self-identity creates in a person the strong internal self-motivations to act consistent with (moral) values—an important characteristic of extraordinary leader performance. This also highlights the importance of self-regulatory processes to character, which I address next.

**Character and self-regulation.** As indicated above, character has a close relation to *how a person acts* (a person’s characteristic ways of thinking, feeling, and acting). That is, character involves a complex of underlying “psychological mechanisms” or self-regulatory processes that give direction, pattern and continuity to a person’s actions across situations (Funder, 2001, p. 198). Trait-based approaches to leader character have paid limited attention to these self-regulatory aspects of character.

Self-regulation is the process through which leaders align their values with their intentions and actions (Baumeister et al., 2009). It involves the processes whereby people exert self-control by (a) setting internal standards (existing or newly formulated); (b) assessing discrepancies between these standards and actual or expected outcomes; and (c) identifying intended actions for reconciling these discrepancies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Two important theories regarding self-regulation have potentially important implications for leader character: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995) and regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997).

***Self-determination.*** Central to the development of self-regulatory aspects of leader character is that they involve internally driven and controlled regulatory processes as opposed to externally regulated standards or consequences. The theoretical grounding for this derives from Deci and Ryan's (1995) self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is an approach to explaining the self-regulatory processes involved in self-motivation and personality development. At the heart of SDT is the concept of self and involves two core self-regulatory processes: internalization which refers to people's "taking in" a value or standard; and integration which refers to the further transformation of that standard into a personal standard so that subsequently, it will emanate from a "sense of self" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). Leader's who internalize and integrate values and standards in this way, achieve a high level of volitional control over their behavior (autonomy), experience an inner sense of efficacy (competence), and feel a sense of relatedness or connection to their true self (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This internalized self-regulation enables the leader

to achieve and maintain alignment between internal core beliefs, self-identity and leadership actions (Gardner et al., 2005).

*Self-regulatory focus.* Recently Kark and Dijk (2007) advanced a complex conceptual framework grounded in a leader's values and self-regulatory processes to explain extraordinary leader performance. This self-regulation-based approach is grounded in regulatory focus theory (RFT) which explains how people are motivated differently depending on their values and desired-end state (Higgins, 1997, 1998). RFT proposes two distinct desired end-states with two corresponding regulatory focuses: "strong oughts" representing beliefs about duties, obligations, and responsibilities with a corresponding "prevention" regulatory focus that entails sensitivity to avoiding negative outcomes; and "strong ideals" representing hopes, wishes and aspirations with a corresponding "promotion" regulatory focus that entails sensitivity to achieving positive outcomes (Higgins, 1997, p. 1281).

Kark and Dijk combine RFT with the concept of motivation to lead (MTL) introduced by Chan and Drasgow (2001). MTL is an individual-differences construct that affects the decision of individuals aspiring to leadership roles; leaders' decisions to assume leadership training, roles, and responsibilities; their persistence as leaders; and the extent of their efforts to lead. MTL refers to a type of motivation (rather than the amount or level of motivation) that includes three related but distinct dimensions: *affective* MTL in which individuals are motivated to lead because they like to lead others; *noncalculative* MTL in which individuals are not calculative in terms of costs,

responsibilities, etc. in their decision to lead; and *social normative* MTL in which individuals lead from a sense of duty or responsibility.

Putting RFT and MTL together, Kark and Dijk argue that the relationship between a leader's values (oughts or ideals) and regulatory focus (prevention or promotion) produces a motivation to lead that explains positive leadership. Specifically, extraordinary (transformational) leaders are distinguished by ideals, promotion focus and affective MTL, whereas less extraordinary (transactional) leaders are distinguished by oughts, prevention focus and socio-normative MTL. A strength of this approach is its sophisticated theoretical unraveling of the complex self-regulatory and motivational processes involved in extraordinary leader performance. A limitation is that little empirical research has yet been conducted to test and extend the propositions associated with this approach (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

In sum, self-regulatory processes have important implications for leader character. Specifically, self-regulation is critical to the leader's capacity to enact or externalize character. It involves the processes by which a leader governs how he/she acts. SDT is important to explain how values, principles and ideals are internalized and integrated into the self-identity to produce the self-motivation and self-regulation to govern behavior independent of external controls/forces. RFT provides insights into the specific types of self-motivations that may emerge from SDT – strong ought and strong ideal motivations. Both help explain how a leader with character might be self-motivated to exhibit extraordinary leader performance.

## **Summary**

The objective of this review was not to be comprehensive, but to generate an initial set of concepts and issues to guide this study. Of primary importance is the notion of extraordinary leader performance being defined by the leader's willingness to transcend self-interests and sacrifice for the common good (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Also of primary importance is the dichotomy inherent in this extraordinary leader performance between the leader's commitment to certain overriding, common good end-values on the one hand, and the claims of a variety of lesser everyday wants, needs and responsibilities on the other (Burns, 1978). The capacity of the leader to resolve this dichotomy – to transcend self-interests and serve the common good—is ground zero for the study of leader character.

In the review of prevailing approaches to leader character, of primary importance is the strong emphasis on trait-based approaches. These approaches were presented to have significant limitations including: a narrow focus on traits to the neglect of other important internal aspects of character; a narrow focus on moral aspects of character to the neglect of more achievement-oriented aspects of character; and a neglect of the situated nature of character—both its socially embedded and situationally dynamic aspects.

Overall, the review highlighted the need for a more holistic and integrative approach to leader character that extends beyond a narrow focus on traits to include important internal aspects of character—self-identity and self-regulation; as well as important external aspects of leader character—social embeddedness and situational

dynamics, e.g., adversity. An approach to leader character that better takes these factors into consideration should provide a more robust understanding of leader character and its significance to extraordinary leader performance. Based on this review, in the next chapter, I establish the conceptual grounding and research questions that will guide this study.

## Chapter 3

### CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#### Approach to Theory Building

**Interpretive approach.** The main purpose of grounded theory (which I discuss in depth in the methods section of this proposal) is to develop theory. For this study, I have chosen an interpretive approach as the ontological foundation for my theory building. An interpretive approach to theory building places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers accomplish this by getting as close to the inside of the experience as possible by entering research participants' worlds and seeing this world as they do—from the inside. An interpretive approach means more than interpreting how participant's view their situations, but also recognizes that the resulting theory is an interpretation in that it depends on the researcher's view. In other words, the subjectivity of the researcher provides a way of viewing the data and it is therefore assumed that the person conducting the research study will have a unique interpretation of the results (Charmaz, 2006).

**Middle range theory.** In addition, the focus of my theory building is to construct a middle range theory of leader character in combat. Middle range theories consist of abstract renderings of specific social phenomena that are grounded in data. Most grounded theories are middle range or substantive theories because they address delimited problems in specific substantive areas (Charmaz, 2006). A key difference of this approach to theory building is that the immediate concern of the study is not

generalizability of the theory beyond the specific substantive area of study. Generalizing beyond the substantive area of study is a task for follow on studies to transfer the theory to a new context and re-examine the theoretical categories and assess their applicability. Thus, for this study I keep my theory building close to the specific social phenomenon I studied: leader character in combat.

**Research questions.** Lastly, in grounded theory research questions do not entail statements about relationships between a dependent and an independent variable, as is common in deductive, quantitative studies, because the purpose is not to test hypotheses. Research questions in grounded theory studies are statements that identify the phenomenon to be studied; it tells the researcher what specifically to focus on and what to find out about this subject (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The original research question is a directive that leads the researcher immediately to examine a specific performance, the site where events are occurring, documents, people acting, or informants to interview. It gets the researcher started and helps him to stay focused throughout the research project (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 39).

Also, underlying grounded theory approach is the assumption that all of the concepts pertaining to a given phenomenon have not yet been identified or if so, then the relationships between concepts are not well understood or conceptually underdeveloped (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, the initial research questions presented below are intentionally broad with the expectation that as the research process progresses, that is, as my field data collection and analysis progresses, these questions will become progressively narrowed and more focused as concepts and their relationships are



discovered to be relevant or irrelevant (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). With the above understanding of my approach to theory building, I now present the research questions that will guide this study.

### **Guiding Research Question**

As indicated in the introduction to this study, this dissertation is inspired by the striking observation that the leaders involved in this study so frequently and consistently demonstrated such extraordinary performance as that illustrated by SSG K—risking his life by low crawling up a hill under fire in spite of his acute fear. I described this performance as characterized by a willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity. This signature feature of leader performance in combat reflects the characteristics definitive of all forms of extraordinary leader performance. As highlighted in the literature review, extraordinary leaders are distinguished foremost by their ability to transcend their own individual self-interests in sacrificing for others and striving to achieve the mission and collective good of their work unit, organization, community or entire society. This transcending self-interests and willingness to sacrifice for the common good is the defining standard and “ultimate test” of extraordinary leader performance (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Burns, 1978, p. 46; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). The overarching objective of this study is to explain this extraordinary leader performance through the concept of leader character. In doing so, I attempt to contribute to our understanding of the significance of character to positive forms of leadership. The guiding research question then is:

*RQ 1: How does leader character explain extraordinary leader performance?*

## Secondary Research Questions

I now drill down to secondary research questions that will help me to answer the guiding research question for this study. Based on concepts and issues from my literature review, I organize these secondary research questions around a working conceptual framework that involves two main categories: the internalization and externalization of character. The internalization of character refers to the psychological structures and processes important to the formation of leader character. That is, it concerns how character impacts *who a leader is*—the leader’s sense of self and identity including the social context in which the leader is embedded. The externalization of character refers to the psychological structures and processes important to the enactment of character. That is, it concerns how character impacts *how a leader acts*—the leader’s self-regulatory processes that govern how he/she thinks, feels and acts, including the situational dynamics of the leader’s environment.

**Internalization of character.** Central to the internalization of character is socialization of the leader. As indicated in my literature review, the normative dimension of character suggests that leader character is socially constituted around “social traits” or virtues that reflect the values, principles and ideals of the culture/community in which the leader is embedded. For leader socialization to be effective in producing character capable of extraordinary leader performance, my literature review suggests that two factors are most important.

First, these social traits or virtues must be internalized into the leader’s sense of self and identity. Self and identity are at the core of socialization (Gecas, 1986). As

noted in my literature review, research into the personal origins of positive leadership and extraordinary leader performance as well as research in moral psychology on character increasingly emphasize the importance of self-identity to moral development and functioning (Lord & Hall, 2005; Blasi, 2005). This sense of self-identity is grounded in self-awareness and moral commitment to certain good ends and high purposes associated with extraordinary leader performance.

Second, this internalization must involve some kind of self-motivation if the leader is not to be “oversocialized” in the sense of just being a passive sponge of social influences and product of external forces (Gecas, 1986, p. 133). To this end, self-determination theory may be important to understanding this self-motivation. As noted in the literature review, SDT is an approach to explaining the self-regulatory processes involved in self-motivation and personality—character—development. SDT conceptualizes internalization in two processes: *internalization* which refers to people’s “taking in” a value or standard; and *integration* which refers to the further transformation of that standard into a personal standard so that subsequently, it will emanate from a “sense of self” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). Through such internalization and integration, a leader becomes self-motivated to achieve and maintain alignment between the values and standards he/she has internalized as core beliefs, his/her self-identity and leadership actions (Gardner et al., 2005).

However, my literature review noted that a key limitation of prevailing trait-based approaches to leader character is that they rely on abstract concepts of virtues and neglect how these virtues are internalized and integrated into the leader’s sense of self and

identity. Thus, understanding how these social traits are internalized into the leader's self-identity is important to understanding leader character.

*RQ 2A: How are “social traits” internalized into the leader’s sense of self and identity?*

The literature review also highlighted that the internalization of character should not only produce a sense of self-identity and strong self-motivation, but that this internalization will produce a particular motivational orientation towards leadership. That is, the leader will not just be self-motivated, but will be self-motivated to lead with a particular focus towards particular desired ends or goals. To this end, Kark and Dijk (2007) theorized how regulatory focus theory may explain this motivational orientation to lead.

RFT suggests two distinct motivational orientations—“strong oughts” associated with duties, obligations and responsibilities and “strong ideals” associated with hopes, wishes and aspirations. This framework is consistent with traditional understandings of character. The normative dimension of character suggests that it has much to do with a leader's moral motivation towards duty, obligation and responsibility (Puka, 2004; Bandura, 2008), as well as more achievement-oriented motivation associated with mastery and excellence including moral excellence (Shields & Bredemeier, 2005).

This suggests that the internalization of character has significant implications for a leader's motivation to lead: a motivational orientation that reflects a commitment to duty, obligation, and responsibility; and a motivational orientation that reflects a commitment to virtue, excellence and achievement. This dual-motivational orientation

seems particularly important to extraordinary leader performance since it consists not just in doing the right thing—fulfilling the strong oughts, but also doing the “extraordinary”—achieving strong ideals. In short, the internalization of character likely has a strong influence on the motivational orientation of the leader towards leadership.

*RQ 2B: How does character influence the leader’s motivational orientation to lead?*

**Externalization of character.** Central to the externalization of character is the enactment of character in the face of adversity. Character involves an enduring and consistent way of functioning. Yet what a person does in commonplace situations may be much less indicative of character than what she or he does when severely tempted or pressed. Certain aspects of character tend to emerge under stress, fatigue, or temptation. A person with character is typically thought to be one who has the “strength” to withstand adversity, to resist temptation, and overcome obstacles and challenges. We credit athletes and sports teams for “showing a lot of character” by not folding under pressure and persevering in overcoming adversity to achieve victory. The dichotomy inherent in extraordinary leader performance also underscores the importance of this capacity to enact and sustain commitment to high purposes and end values amidst a plethora of competing and conflicting lesser wants, needs and interests including self-interests.

Peterson & Seligman (2004) in their strength-based approach to character emphasized certain self-regulatory routes that enable a person to not only resist adversity (negative route), but also pursue morally praiseworthy activities and projects (positive

route). Regulatory focus theory suggests similar dual negative and positive self-regulatory processes: prevention emphasizing sensitivity to avoiding negative outcomes, i.e., resisting adversity; and promotion emphasizing sensitivity to achieving positive outcomes, i.e., achieving goals. This topic has also been neglected in the prevailing trait-based approach to leader character. Thus, important to understanding leader character will be discovering both the positive and negative the self-regulatory structures and processes that enable a leader to demonstrate the strong character to resist and overcome adversity and pursue praiseworthy purposes and pursuits.

*RQ 3: How does character provide the self-regulatory “strength” to enable a leader to resist and overcome adversity?*

### **Towards an Integrative Concept of Leader Character**

All of the concepts reviewed in the literature review and highlighted above have been empirically researched and theoretically developed to various stages. What is not well understood—empirically or theoretically—is how these concepts relate (or not) to leader character and extraordinary leader performance. That is, a framework that identifies the core constructs of leader character and integrates them into a holistic theoretical explanation of extraordinary leader performance is lacking. This lack of clarity surrounding essential concepts and relationships is a critical stumbling block to advancing research on leader character. This point is emphasized by many leader character researchers as noted in my review (Sosik & Cameron, 2010; Hannah & Avolio, 2011).

Beyond this there is a need for clarity about the root construct(s) underlying leader character that can facilitate a theoretically meaningful integrative framework that explains extraordinary leader performance. Specifically, the task at hand in this study is to develop a model *not* of character in general; but leader character in particular, and further, a kind of leader character that can explain extraordinary leader performance. It is not clear how well the prevailing trait-based approaches to character, especially those that adopt universal taxonomies of virtues, address this task (e.g., Sosik & Cameron, 2010; Riggio et al., 2010). For instance, Peterson and Seligman's classification includes six core moral virtues and 24 enabling character strengths thought to define the universal "traits of a good person" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 89). Are the traits that define a "good person" synonymous with those that define a "good leader" capable of extraordinary performance?

By contrast, others have adopted a more focused approach emphasizing a particular construct thought to be especially important to leader character. For instance, Kaiser and Hogan (2010) focus on integrity as the root construct that underpins leader character. Alternatively, Avolio and colleagues have grounded authentic leadership development (ALD) in the concept of authenticity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). They suggest that authenticity is not only the "root construct" for ALD, but for all forms of positive leadership and its development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 316). In sum, the point of this brief analysis is to note the conceptual ambiguity surrounding leader character and to highlight the need for clarity around the root construct(s) that distinguish

leader character capable of producing extraordinary leader performance from other more general forms of character.

*RQ 4: What is the root construct underlying leader character and extraordinary leader performance?*



## Chapter 4

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the study is to develop an empirically based theoretical understanding of character and its significance to extraordinary leader performance such that an empirical test of the model will be possible as a follow on to this study. I employed an inductive, grounded theory approach to this study using data collected via (1) physically embedding for an extended period with U.S. Army infantry platoons operating in combat environment; (2) participant observation in the full range of combat activities engaged in by these infantry platoons; and (3) in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants. I relied on prior theory and research as general guides for the initial collection of data, development of initial interview protocols, and in determining what aspects of character and leadership dynamics would be best to observe in greater depth (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In total, I spent four months embedded with six different platoons (two months were spent in transit to and from Afghanistan and working administrative/non-embed locations), conducted 91 formal interviews (digitally captured and later transcribed), and recorded more than 500 pages of participant observations and personal notes. Below I address key aspects of my research methodology in greater detail.

#### **Grounded Theory and Research Design**

The design for this study involves a grounded theory approach. The grounded theory method was originally advanced by Glaser and Strauss (2009), elaborated by Glaser (1978), Strauss (1987), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and others. Grounded theory

has been strongly advocated for leadership research (e.g., Conger & Toegel, 2002; Parry, 1998) as well as for moral character research (e.g., Blasi, 2005). The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method in which theory emerges from, and is grounded in, the experiences of those living the phenomenon of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents; that is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory development stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. The purpose of grounded theory method is to build theory that is faithful to and illuminates the experiences of those living the phenomenon under study. Below, I discuss four key elements of my approach: (1) ethnographic approach; (2) data collection procedures; (3) data analysis procedures conducted both in the field and back at home; and (4) techniques employed to ensure data trustworthiness.

**Ethnographic approach.** Ethnography means recording the life a particular group and thus entails sustained participation and observation. The goal of much ethnography is to gain an insider's depiction of the studied phenomenon. However, whereas conventional ethnography focuses on the *setting* and gathering thick description (Ashworth, 1995; Charmaz & Olesen, 1997), grounded theory ethnography gives priority to the *process* occurring within the setting. That is, grounded theory ethnographers study *what is happening in the setting* and seek to make a conceptual rendering of these actions (Charmaz, 2006).

An ethnographic approach to grounded theory offers several advantages over grounded theory that relies, for example, on interviews with informants (Charmaz, 2006). First, how people experience and understand phenomena may not match the explanations they give to investigators. Moreover, participants' most important explanations may consist of tacit understandings that are seldom articulated among themselves, let alone to investigators. Furthermore, researcher understanding of the studied phenomenon derives most directly from the immediacy of participation in social actors' shared worlds (Prus, 1996). The kind of phenomena that are typically the focus of grounded theory are phenomena whose dynamics are deeply situated in context and embodied in the sensemaking processes of those directly involved—such as character and leadership, which are the focus of this study (Conger & Toegel, 2002). The situated and embodied nature engenders emergent, nonlinear patterns of relationships and subjective meanings that are difficult to access retrospectively through interviews or traditional survey-based approaches. In practical terms, this means the researcher needs to embed for an extended period with participants and share in relevant experiences in order to gain the insider's perspective that is the hallmark of grounded theory ethnography. For these reasons, I adopted a grounded theory ethnographic approach to this study. Below I discuss three important aspects of my ethnographic approach: research site selection, embedding, and theoretical sampling and saturation.

***Research site selection.*** The research site selected for this study is U.S. Army infantry platoons deployed to Afghanistan and engaged in combat and counterinsurgency operations (COIN). This context was selected for the expected high salience of the focal

phenomenon of interest for this study—character. Character as a phenomenon is understood to be most salient under conditions of adversity (Kupperman, 1991). Combat is an “extreme context” characterized by diverse and intense forms of adversity (Hannah et al., 2009, p. 897). Thus, to study character, I sought combat for my context and site selection.

My site selection was based on three key criteria. First, I sought military units whose primary task/function is warfighting—combat arms and preferably infantry—rather than support functions. Second, I sought small groups/units with a clearly identifiable, formal leadership team whose influence would have direct observable effects. Third, I sought units that are physically located in the combat environment rather than remote locations removed from “the fight” or located at their home station/not deployed. Based on these three criteria, I targeted Army infantry platoons deployed in Afghanistan, actively engaged in conducting combat and counterinsurgency operations.

***Embedding.*** How to go about embedding with U.S. Army infantry platoons in combat presented an administrative challenge. I considered two alternatives: (1) embedding as a civilian researcher, similar to how reporters embed with military units in combat, or (2) accepting a commission in the Army and embedding as an Army researcher. The latter was the option utilized for this study. As a former infantry officer in the U.S. Marines, I was able to apply for and was granted a commission as a Major in the U.S. Army Reserve. Once commissioned, I was able, through the assistance of senior Army officers sponsoring this study, to obtain orders putting me on active duty and assigning me to a unit deployed in Afghanistan to conduct research on behalf of the

Army. After several months of administrative processing, I finally arrived at my assigned unit in Afghanistan in the middle of June 2010. My orders were effective for six months, redeploying me back to my home in the United States in early December 2010.

The command to which I was attached was very supportive of my research mission and allowed me maximum “freedom of movement” throughout the “battlespace.” Over the course of my deployment, I was able to embed with six different platoons. In selecting platoons with which to embed, I focused on units operating in more “kinetic” areas, i.e., areas with more hostile enemy activity and combat incidents. Sometimes tasks from my supported command or other operational constraints influenced where I went, the units with whom I embedded, and how long I was able to stay. My typical embed would last from at least a week to as many as three weeks at a time, depending on the unit’s operational activities and constraints.

The platoons with which I embedded were located at remote combat outposts (COPs). Conditions on the COPs were austere and did not afford privacy or administrative space for data coding/analysis. So, after a period embedded with a platoon, I would return to my administrative base at my command’s headquarters located at a more secure and built-up forward operating base (FOB) to download my data, conduct initial data coding/analysis, plan my next embed, and “refit” my gear/equipment before going back out for my next embed. Due to the short duration of my deployment, I maximized my embedded data collection time in the field at the COPs and minimized my time in my administrative base.

*Theoretical sampling and saturation.* Consistent with grounded theory, a theoretical sampling approach was used for this study (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the researcher jointly collects, codes, and analyzes data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop theory as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p.45). The purpose of theoretical sampling is to gain a deeper understanding of analyzed cases and facilitate the development of analytic frame and concepts used in the research. Thus, the process of data collection is controlled by emergent theory.

Once embedded with each selected platoon, I initially interviewed the platoon leadership team, which includes the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and squad leaders. This initial sampling and interviewing was based on a simple heuristic: Go and observe where the action is, and interview those involved and influential in the action. Subsequent sampling and interviewing was based on the following heuristic: Go and observe where I have the best rapport and emphasize depth of observation/insight over breadth.

In grounded theory, the researcher continually judges how many groups—people, missions, platoons—should be sampled for each theoretical point. The criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category's theoretical saturation (Glaser & Straus, 2009). Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the researcher can develop properties of the category.

Over the course of my deployment, I was able to embed with six different platoons. Three of these platoons I embedded with twice and one platoon three times. In retrospect, six platoons were probably too many given the short, six-month duration of my deployment. By the fourth and fifth platoon embed, the themes and categories were clearly emerging, and it became important to focus my data collection by getting deeper into select topics that seemed of greater significance to my informants. To do this, I focused my sampling on going back to platoons with which I had better rapport and where I would be able to get into greater depth of discussion with my informants. This logic drove my theoretical sampling until it came time to redeploy.

In addition, multiple embeds with the same platoon allowed me to do member checks with key informants. Member checking refers to taking ideas back to my informants for their confirmation. I also used this process to help elaborate my emerging codes and categories.

### **Data Collection**

As part of the constant comparison method used in grounded theory, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). As stated above, my data were collected over the course of a six-month active duty deployment while assigned to an Army unit deployed in Afghanistan. My data collection plan relied primarily on participant-observation and informal and in-depth semi-structured interview techniques as well as critical decision method (CDM) interviews. Data were collected from multiple platoons and multiple informants within platoons, as well as from other informants belonging to higher-level headquarters. Participant observations, as well as

my personal observations and reflections on my experiences, were recorded in field journals (500 pages total), and all interviews were digitally recorded (91 formal recorded and transcribed interviews). Below I address key aspects of my data collection in greater detail.

**Participant observation.** A primary source of data for this study was participant observation. Participant observation is both an overall approach to inquiry and a data-gathering method. It involves first hand involvement in the social world chosen for study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Being a participant observer allowed me the opportunity not only to observe leaders and soldiers in combat but also to actively engage in the full range of their activities. Such participation was necessary, given that I was studying complex and morally charged processes related to how leaders and soldiers deal with the adversity of combat. Douglas (1976) suggests that participation in the group being observed is a basic research method needed to get at complex social phenomena: “The less concrete the phenomena being studied, the more problematic they are for members of society, and the more they are subject to moral or material interest conflicts, the more the researcher must use natural participation in the group as the basic method to get at the phenomena” (p. 28).

Participant observation entails joining an organization and making coworkers know of your dual role as an employee and researcher (Whyte, 1984). In my case, it involved embedding in platoons with a dual role as Army researcher as well as commissioned Army officer. Embedding as a participant observer offered two key advantages. First, as noted above, it enabled me to not only directly observe leaders and



soldiers in combat, but also directly experience the phenomena being studied. This allowed me to enter the participants' world and experience combat as they do. This insider's perspective exposed me as a researcher to otherwise unobtainable views, views that the traditional deductive methods have difficulty penetrating. Second, as a researcher, I was still formally an "outsider" and this allowed me the opportunity to build unique relationships with my participants, develop special rapport, and in turn, ask questions that might otherwise seem unusual coming from a peer or "organic" member of the unit.

Throughout my participation, I recorded my observations daily in a field journal that I kept on my person at all times. Observational notes are reports of events or interactions observed in the "field." My observational notes included not only my observations about actions, setting, and persons with whom I was engaged, but also my personal observations about my own lived experiences. During each embed, I observed leaders and soldiers engaged in their daily activities and wrote down to the best of my ability what was done along with descriptions of the setting. Once a day, I would review my observations, analyze them, and write memos of my thoughts. These observations about my participants' lived experiences, as well as my personal introspection about my own experiences, helped me to reflect and gain insights that in turn helped focus my observations and data collection the next day.

A concern with participant observation is that the presence of the researcher may influence the behavior of the informants, in my case the soldiers with whom I was embedded. Several factors, however, attenuated potential biasing effects. First, I found

that it was not uncommon for the units with whom I embedded to have outsiders like me spend time with them. Frankly, I was surprised to observe throughout my deployment various individuals and small teams circulating around the battlespace, conducting a diverse range of inquiry on behalf of the Army (although it was rare for any of these individuals and teams to embed as deeply and for the extended duration that I did). Consequently, my presence was “no big deal” to my informants and did not appear to change their behaviors in any observable way.

Second, my previous military combat experience provided an awareness and understanding of how to function and relate effectively with my informants. Consequently, I was able to fit in in a way that was unobtrusive and minimized potential disruption that my presence may have caused. For example, logistically, I made sure to not require any special accommodations, which, as a visitor and senior officer, would have been expected. On the contrary, I insisted upon living in and among the soldiers under the same conditions that they lived.

Furthermore, I knew how to function in the environment (1) in terms of the basics of daily living in austere field conditions; (2) technically in terms of using my gear, equipment, and weapons; and (3) tactically on missions. This alleviated concerns about having to “babysit” me. In fact, I proved myself to be quite useful in several ways including (1) carrying my fair share of ammunition, mortars, and other organizational gear on missions; (2) pulling security and guard duties at night; and (3) operating effectively during firefights. My usefulness in this regard was much appreciated by the units as they were generally shorthanded and welcomed the extra “warm body.” Most

importantly, it enabled me to establish rapport and trust with my informants, which was critical to my research effectiveness.

**Establishing rapport and trust.** My participation with the units with whom I embedded was intensive in that it involved “24/7” immersion with my informants for weeks at a time. Such a study requires that researchers devote considerable time developing rapport and trusting relations with participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This need for rapport and trust was exacerbated by the setting of my study. Combat is serious life and death business. Threat and risk are pervasive; failure to attend to the countless “little things” involved in conducting combat missions can get people hurt or killed. Combat units cannot afford to have with them on missions “dead weight,” i.e., people who do not know what they are doing and cannot function effectively. Dead weight increases the risk and burden for everyone else. Leaders and soldiers will therefore tend to be standoffish with—if not suspicious of—outsiders until they demonstrate that they “get it” and can function effectively on missions and in firefights.

To be effective in conducting my research and gaining an insider’s perspective, I needed to prove myself. I accomplished this through a number of different techniques. Most important was proving myself physically, technically, and tactically on missions, as I discussed above. Also important, as discussed above, was fitting in by not requiring any special accommodations or treatment, making myself unobtrusive, and generally trying to be helpful and “carrying my share of the weight” whenever possible.

As each embed progressed and I successfully proved myself with my informants and established rapport and trust, I was careful to keep all my discussions and interviews

confidential, never revealing any information entrusted to me. I was also careful to maintain an impartial and objective presence by not expressing my personal opinions on any issues within the unit or regarding missions. On the other hand, when asked, I was happy to share with my informants details about my research, my personal background, and other information about myself and my experiences. This was helpful in building rapport because it allowed my informants to get to know me personally. To not do so would have been unusual in that setting where everyone knows the intimate details of each others' lives, and it would likely have provoked some suspicion among my informants that may have diminished their openness to me. Furthermore, I was encouraged to discover the curiosity my informants had about my research and their belief that it was an important project. Overall, the combination of techniques described above proved very effective in establishing the necessary rapport and trust with my informants.

**Interviews.** I supplemented my direct observation with in-depth, semi-structured interviews (91 total). In-depth semi-structured interviews are based on a set of topics developed into a protocol of open-ended questions to be discussed in depth. It is described as “conversation with a purpose” (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, p. 149, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101). The intent is to obtain an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or set of topics with which the informant has relevant experience. My interview protocol was based initially on the sensitizing concepts identified through my review of relevant literatures. As my data collection progressed, I modified my protocol in response to topics and issues emerging in my data.

I supplemented my semi-structured interviews with critical decision method (CDM) interviews. Critical decision method interviews are used to probe challenging decisions made during critical incidents (Crandall, Klein, & Hoffman, 2006). In a CDM interview, the researcher tries to elicit information about cognitive functions such as decision making, planning, and sense making within a specific challenging incident. I used CDM interviews to probe my informants' thoughts and decisions following a significant event I observed, such as a firefight, that I judged might reveal information pertinent to my research. On occasion, informants revealed events that occurred in the past that I then used CDM techniques to probe.

A typical interview lasted an hour. After obtaining informed consent and providing assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, I began by asking about the informant's military background and experience. Although I did not ask for demographic information, all except one of my informants were male and they ranged in age from approximately 19 to early- to mid-30s. At the start of an embed I interviewed all the formal leaders of a platoon. During each interview, I would ask a series of broad, open-ended questions from my protocol. As the interview progressed, I asked for clarifications on certain points or terms. As themes began to emerge across interviews and observations, I followed up by re-interviewing informants who were particularly insightful (key informants) or selecting new informants based on my observations or recommendations from other informants.

**Implicit meaning.** In many of my interviews I encountered a problem in which the informants seemed to lack words to effectively express what their faces and demeanor

suggested were significant thoughts and feelings. In response to an open-ended question probing experiences such as a firefight or dealing with the loss of a close friend, often informants would shrug their shoulders after thinking for a moment, and say “I don’t know” or “it’s hard to explain.” My assessment was that I was encountering what Charmaz (2006, p. 34) describes as “the implicit world of meaning, but not of explicit words.” This is perhaps attributable to the fact that many of my informants lack formal education to help them understand and label the thoughts and feelings they have experienced.

In these situations, further direct questioning would sometimes help my informants find the words to give adequate expression to their experience. Alternatively, I would ask the informant to simply “tell the story” of what happened in order to obtain the narrative of events and then follow up with direct questions to probe specific aspects of the narrative—sort of an improvised CDM approach. As a final technique, I would sometimes suggest words or meanings and ask the informant if it resonated with their experience and ask them to clarify or explain.

All these techniques can be criticized from the perspective that I was “forcing the data” by asking preconceived questions. An interpretive perspective, however, judges these techniques as useful in “generating data” by probing the implicit and taken-for-granted aspects of my informants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2006, p. 34). The technique also served as a kind of on-the-spot “member-checking”: after listening to my informants accounts, I would restate and refine what I heard using different words and asking if it reflected their thinking/feeling and resonated with their experience. In sum, the above

procedures and techniques combined enabled me to collect a rich set of data upon which to base my analysis, which I discuss next.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study was iterative and divided into two main phases. The first phase was analysis conducted while deployed and in the field. Here, I conducted initial coding based on my observational notes and notes from my interviews to generate rough, broad categorizations of the data to drive theoretical sampling. My initial categories and theoretical sampling was then further refined by subsequent data collection. Emergent themes and dimensions were identified through the continual review of interview notes and field journal entries. Data analysis also relied on ongoing member checks with key informants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The second phase of analysis involved detailed axial and selective coding (described below) completed upon redeployment back to the United States. This analysis was based on 91 transcribed interviews. All interview data were transcribed and coded. Handwritten field notes were not transcribed but were coded by hand with the same coding system. Below I address key aspects of my data collection and analysis in greater detail.

**Initial field coding from notes.** As I began collecting data, I also began the process of open coding in which my data were broken down, sorted, and compared to identify similarities and differences in observed phenomenon and to identify basic concepts in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Key to this initial step in the coding process was to focus on the action taking place. Classic grounded theory emphasizes

creating analyses of action and process (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The first grounded theory question to ask is: “What’s happening here?” (Glaser, 1978). The intent is to apply initial meaning to the action in the setting and make a conceptual rendering of these actions. To facilitate this analysis, in my initial field coding I emphasized the use of *gerunds*—verbal nouns or typically nouns ending in “ing” that express the action of the verb as generalized or in continuance. For example, *home* was one of the early conceptual categories identified, but instead of just coding it *home*, I used the label *bringing everybody home* to better capture the action I observed. The idea is that *home* as a noun suggests a topic or theme, but *bringing everybody home* is suggestive of the leadership action involved with home. This is a technique I adopted from Charmaz (2006) and found very helpful.

In addition, during this initial open coding, I used *in vivo* codes that reflected my participants’ special terms. *In vivo* codes serve as symbolic markers of participants’ speech and meanings and therefore provide a useful analytic point of departure. This initial coding process emphasizing the use of gerunds, *in vivo* codes, and constant comparison was performed in the field during data collection on an ongoing basis.

**Memo writing.** While collecting data in the field, I also kept extensive observational notes as described above and wrote analytic memos. Compared to observational notes, analytic memos are lengthier and more involved thoughts about an event, usually written in conceptual form (Corbin & Strauss, 2009). By writing observations and memos continuously throughout the data collection process, I was able



to better explore, explicate, and theorize about themes and patterns emerging from the data.

The results of initial coding and memo-writing processes helped me to identify the criteria for subsequent data collection. As indicated above, upon conclusion of an embed, I returned to my administrative base where I had access to better office-type accommodations to facilitate more systematic analysis of my data. Here I also performed data maintenance activities, e.g., backing up my interview data, maintaining records to ensure trustworthiness, emailing recorded interviews home for transcription, and providing progress reports to my research committee.

**Introspective analysis.** Consistent with my interpretive approach and insider's perspective, I use introspection explicitly as a method of understanding and building theory. Introspection is a controversial and seldom-used method in social sciences. Yet introspection is a valid method particularly for trying to understand complex psychological phenomenon like character. Locke and Latham (2004) argued that introspection must be used in the study of motivation and other psychological concepts such as desire, self-efficacy, purpose, satisfaction, and belief, for example. As psychological states, they argued that concepts like these and others could not be formulated or grasped without introspection. Similarly, given the psychological nature of the concepts investigated for this study and my own participant observations, I relied on introspective analysis to assist me in analyzing and interpreting the data.

**Post-embed data analysis.** The second phase of analysis involved detailed axial and selective coding completed upon redeployment back to the United States. This

analysis is based on 91 transcribed formal semi-structured interviews (approximately 4,000 pages). Specifically, all interview data were transcribed and coded. Handwritten field notes were not transcribed but were coded by hand with the same coding system.

In analyzing my transcribed data, I employed a theory-building approach that involved moving from my data coding and analysis conducted in the field (consisting primarily of thick description and in vivo codes) towards a more abstract and analytical set of codes and theoretical relationships that are integrated into current research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). More specifically, whereas my field coding focused primarily on initial coding—breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data—my post-embed data analysis consisted of axial coding and selective coding.

***Axial coding.*** Axial coding is a set of procedures used after initial coding whereby data are put back together in new ways by making connections between categories. After establishing strong analytic directions through initial open coding, axial coding entails the process of sifting through large amounts of data, identifying the most significant and/or frequent initial codes, and synthesizing them into higher-level categories. It also involves relating categories to subcategories and specifying the properties and dimensions of categories identified. The key to axial coding is making interpretative judgments about the codes and categories that make the most analytic sense for categorizing the data incisively and completely (Charmaz, 2006).

***Selective coding.*** Selective coding is the process of integrating categories to form a grounded theory. It involves selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further

refinement and development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The selective coding process involves several steps: (1) explicating a story line; (2) relating subsidiary categories around the core category by means of the paradigm; (3) relating categories at the dimensional level; (4) validating those relationships against data; and (5) filling in categories that may need further refinement and/or development. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that these processes are not necessarily taken in linear sequence; nor are they distinct in actual practice. In reality during selective coding, one moves back and forth between them in an iterative and interpretive fashion.

In conducting my post-embed analysis, I followed the iterative and interpretive process recommended by Charmaz (2006). I traveled back and forth between the data and an emerging structure of theoretical arguments. Given the volume of transcribed and notes, I initially scanned all my data (e.g., observations, interviews, transcripts, and memos) for dominant themes. As themes began to emerge from the data, I noted them and used them to develop a coherent theoretical framework. After an iterative process of developing, exploring, and evaluating the utility of several alternative frameworks, I arrived at the one that I believed offered a strong contribution to theory while remaining true to my own and my informants' experiences.

### **Data Trustworthiness**

As indicated in Chapter 3, I adopted an interpretive approach to this study. An interpretive approach to theory building means more than interpreting how participant's view their situations, but also recognizes that the resulting theory is an interpretation in that it depends on the researcher's view. In other words, the subjectivity of the researcher

provides a way of viewing the data, and it is therefore assumed that the person conducting the research study will have a unique interpretation of the results (Charmaz, 2006; Labianca et al., 2000). The basis for assessing interpretative data analysis, therefore, is not whether the results can be replicated by another researcher (as it is in positivistic methods) but whether the results are representative of the interpretations of those experiencing the phenomenon under study and whether they embody a plausible interpretation of the phenomenon.

Because interpretive research is based on a different set of ontological and epistemological assumptions than positivistic research, grounded theory researchers who frame their studies in an interpretive paradigm focus on trustworthiness as opposed to the conventional, positivistic criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, instead of *internal validity*, interpretive researchers focus on *credibility*, which involves demonstrating that a true picture of the phenomenon under study is being presented. Instead of *objectivity*, interpretive researchers focus on *confirmability*, which involves demonstrating that findings emerged from the data and not their own predispositions. Instead of *reliability*, interpretive researchers focus on *dependability*, which refers to the acceptability of the research process. Lastly, instead of *external validity*, interpretive researchers focus on *transferability*, which involves providing sufficient detail of the context of the fieldwork for a reader to be able to decide whether the findings can justifiably be applied to another setting. Below, I discuss each of these criteria as they pertain to my study; the criteria are

also summarized in Table 4.1 below, adopted from Corley and Gioia (2004) and Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Table 4.1

*Data Trustworthiness*

Traditional Criteria	Trust-worthiness Criteria	Trustworthiness criteria met through:
Internal Validity	Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended engagement in the field</li> <li>• Triangulation of data types</li> <li>• Peer debriefing</li> <li>• Member checks</li> </ul>
Objectivity	Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meticulous Data Management and Recording:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Verbatim transcription of interviews</li> <li>- Careful notes of observations</li> <li>- Clear notes on theoretical &amp; methodological decisions</li> <li>- Accurate records of contacts &amp; interviews</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Reliability	Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposive and theoretical sampling</li> <li>• Accurate records maintained for an Audit Trail</li> <li>• Informants confidentiality protected</li> </ul>
External Validity	Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detailed (thick) description of organizational context</li> </ul>

**Credibility.** I achieved extended embed time with three different platoons and significant time with three additional platoons. I combined interviews of leaders/soldiers in platoons with participant observation to triangulate what I heard in interviews and saw in action. I also performed member checks with select key informants. My data set has enabled me to identify a robust set of conceptual categories and theoretical framework that reflects my experience and makes a substantive contribution to theory.

**Confirmability.** Despite the austere field conditions, I maintained sound data handling procedures. I kept detailed notes of my observations and wrote memos on theoretical analysis and methodological decisions. I recorded all my semi-structured interviews using a digital recorder and maintained accurate records of my observations and interviews, e.g., dates, times, locations, etc.

**Dependability.** I was able to select the units with which I embedded based on my initial sampling criteria—focusing on platoons that were infantry/combat arms, in key terrain districts/AORs with a high operational tempo and enemy activity, etc. I was also able to select units for my second and third round of data collection based on my theoretical sampling criteria. Throughout, my informants’ confidentiality and anonymity was protected.

**Transferability.** My extended embeds and getting immersed in the platoons I embedded with, including participating in missions/operations, enabled me to collect rich, detailed data. In addition to the above, I was very successful in establishing very good rapport with the units/platoons, embedding for long enough time and for enough operations that there was no problem with the platoon biasing or changing their behaviors due to my presence. I was able to get a good “insider’s perspective” which is the key to grounded theory method.

### **Research Tradeoffs**

In summary, it was important that my study meet all of these criteria. However, I did not want my framework to unduly distort the actual experience of combat. As stated in Chapter 3, the core purpose of grounded theory research is to generate middle-range theory that provides abstract renderings of delimited problems in specific substantive areas (Charmaz, 2006). To this end, I attempted to keep my emergent theory “close” to the specific social phenomena I studied—character and its significance to extraordinary leader performance in combat—and well grounded in the data.

**FINDINGS: THE CHARACTER TO LEAD**

**Emergent Conceptual Rendering**

The purpose of the findings presented below is to elaborate the underlying psychological structure of the *character to lead* and develop a conceptual rendering that explains its significance to extraordinary leader performance in combat. Figure 5.1 graphically depicts that conceptual rendering. The figure captures the basic social psychological processes associated with leader character in combat. The model is organized in two main sections reflecting the emergent data analyzed for this study.

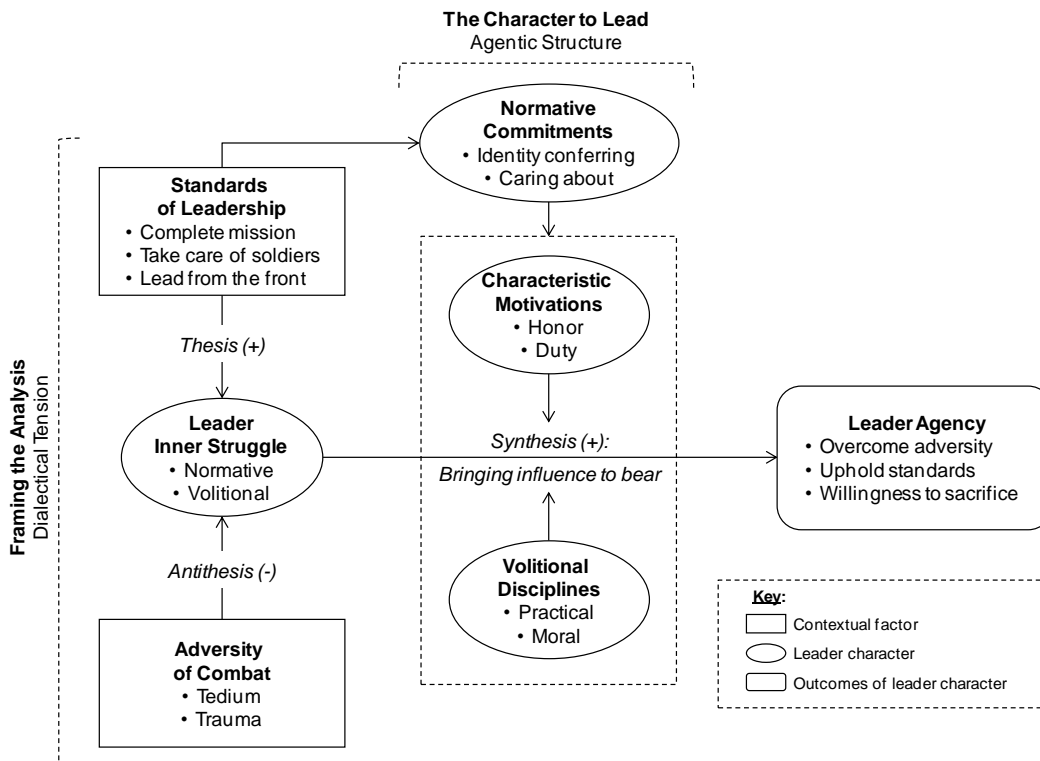


Figure 5.1. Emergent conceptual rendering of leader character and its significance to the practice of leadership in combat.



The left side of the model frames the concept of leader character within a dialectical tension between the adversity of combat and the normative standards of leadership. Inherent in this dialectical tension is the inner struggle of the leader to resist adversity and uphold standards. This inner struggle is the central problem of leading in combat from which the idea of the *character to lead* emerges. As suggested in the Introduction, leader performance in combat is characterized by the willingness to sacrifice in upholding normative standards in the face of adversity. Character is posited to be the decisive factor that explains this strong form of leader agency. The right half of the model depicts the core empirical features of the character to lead. An agentic structure is depicted in which the focal construct is identity-conferring normative commitments that manifest in certain characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines. These constructs capture the psychological structure of character that explains the strong form of leader agency exhibited by my informants—the willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity.

This chapter elaborates on the empirical findings associated with concepts depicted in Figure 5.1. In the first section, I present the findings associated with the dialectical tension on the left side of the model including the empirical themes and categories associated with the standards of leadership, the adversity of combat and the leader's inner struggle. Then, in the second section, I present the findings associated with the agentic structure of the character to lead including the empirical themes and categories associated with identity commitments, characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines. I conclude with some summary empirical observations.

## **Framing the Analysis: Dialectical Tension**

The dialectical framework presented in Figure 5.1 above frames the phenomenon of leader character within the context of the combat environment and social practice of leadership. The adversity of combat and the standards of leadership constitute powerful contextual influences on leaders that have significant implications for the concept of character emergent in this study. Inherent in this emergent concept of character is an *inner struggle* that reflects the internalization of the dialectical tension between these two contextual influences. In this section, I elaborate the empirical themes and categories associated with the standards of leadership and the adversity of combat and that manifest in the leader's inner struggle.

**Standards of leadership.** Combat leadership is a social practice consisting of a body of inherited governing norms that establish authoritative purposes and standards for the exercise of leadership. SSG K referred to these normative standards when he invoked the catchphrase *lead from the front*. My informants frequently used such catchphrases in explaining their actions. *Lead from the front* is one of the most frequently expressed, along with *complete the mission* and *take care of your soldiers*. These three catchphrases in particular constitute the primary organizing norms around which the practice of leadership in combat is governed and the character of the leader is shaped and formed. Other normative catchphrases used by my informants are depicted in Figure 5.2 as first-order categories. In this section, I focus on the three primary organizing norms and highlight their significance to the practice of combat leadership and the normative structure of leader character.

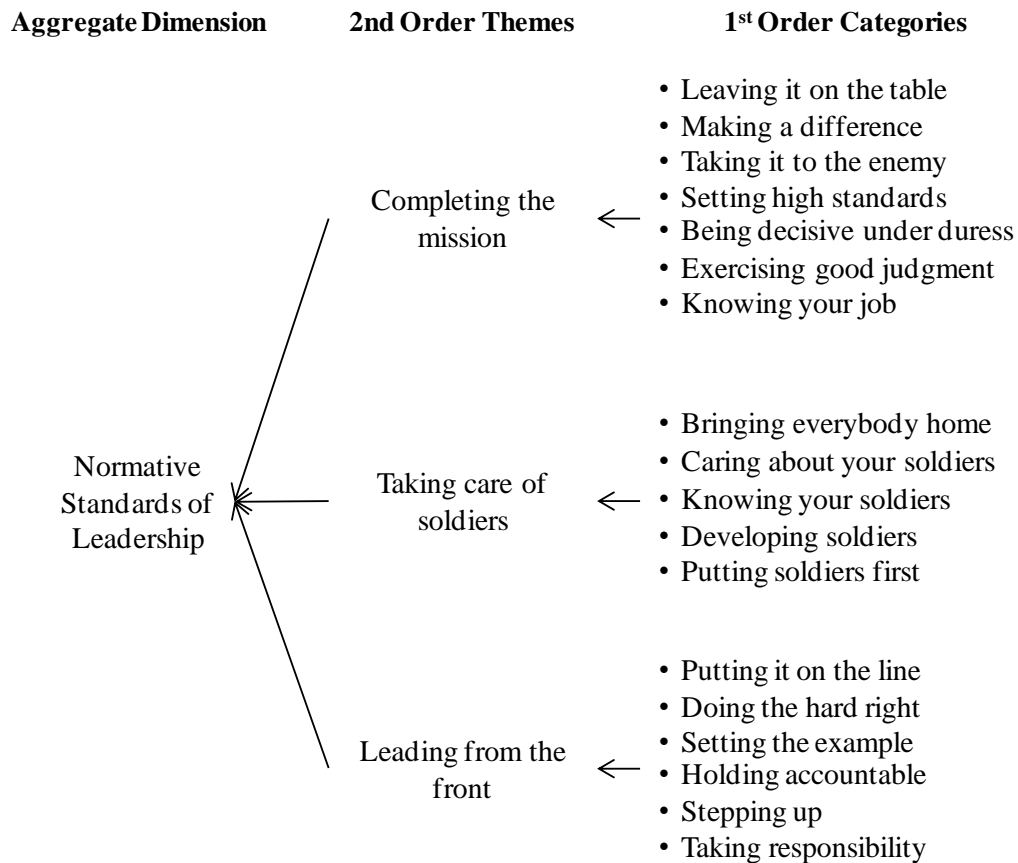


Figure 5.2. The normative standards governing the practice of combat leadership.

As catchphrases, the themes and categories depicted in Figure 5.2 are not checklists of discrete attributes or behaviors, but more like fuzzy sets of beliefs that reveal a certain normative orientation towards the practice of combat leadership. They have a close similarity to what we might call *folkways*—namely, accepted and approved practice. For my informants, they define what it means to be a combat leader, including notions of warranted conduct that gain a leader merit, praise, or honor as well as notions of conduct that are regarded as bad, wrong, or intolerable. They are thus highly normative in the sense that they make strong claims on leaders: They carry moral

significance; they are authoritative; they command and obligate leaders to certain courses of action, e.g., SSG K leading from the front by low crawling up a hill under fire.

A key observation about these catchphrases is that they are not original to my informants. They are understandings my informants have learned over the course of their career in the Army. When discussing their leadership, my informants frequently talk about “how they were raised” or “the way they were brought up” in the Army. These phrases refer to their experiences with previous leaders in their Army career. From these leaders my informants acquired the normative orientation reflected in the catchphrases depicted above in Figure 5.2. These catchphrases therefore represent a kind of normative tradition and social inheritance. They capture the guiding beliefs, standards, and practices that characterize this community of infantry combat leaders. They have been tested in and through their collective experience, survived the test, and have been embedded in the culture of this community as the tacit knowledge essential to being a leader in combat.

The catchphrases depicted in Figure 5.2 thus constitute the normative standards that govern the practice of leadership in combat. Three of these—*completing the mission*, *taking care of soldiers* and *leading from the front*—are depicted as second-order themes because they are the primary organizing norms around the character of the leader is shaped and formed. *Complete the mission* and *take care of soldiers* constitute the point and purpose of leadership in combat—the end purposes a combat leader must serve. *Lead from the front* constitutes the dominant principle governing how leaders lead—how leaders are expected to go about completing missions and taking care of soldiers. Below,

I illustrate the normative orientation embedded in these standards and how leaders enact them in the practice of leading.

*Completing the mission.*

Not completing the mission is not an option.... We were doing a mission we knew was going to be [difficult]. About half way through it, my junior squad leader calls me on my radio, "Hey sir, so-and-so has fallen back. I don't know if we can do this mission." Well, what do you want me to do? Call the commander, "Basically sir, I can't do this mission." That's not going to happen so just shut up and do your part. Granted the guys are sucking and I need to know who's hurt and sucking. But [leaders] need to reinforce the fact that [we] are going to complete this mission. It's going to happen; we're going to do this mission no matter what. That's just how it's going to be. (Platoon Leader)

In combat, completing the mission is the ultimate point and purpose of leadership. Otherwise the "blood, sweat and tears" sacrificed and the destruction and death inflicted is in vain. Completing the mission therefore is sacrosanct and inviolable and exerts a commanding sense of obligation on leaders. This sacrosanct quality is reflected in The Platoon Leader's quote above. He describes a situation in which a junior squad leader questioned continuing with a difficult night mission in which one of his soldiers was failing to keep up during the strenuous foot movement over rough and mountainous terrain. In his response, the Platoon Leader's expresses both the *impossibility of not* completing the mission and the *necessity to* complete the mission: "Not completing the mission is not an option....we're going to do this mission no matter what. That's just how it's going to be." This impossibility of not completing the mission and necessity to complete the mission is neither logical nor causal. That is, there is no logical reason why the Platoon Leader could not call his commander and tell him that the platoon cannot complete the mission. Additionally, his soldiers could very well lack the necessary strength and stamina and thus the impossibility of not completing the mission is not in

this sense causal. Rather, the impossibility of not completing the mission and the necessity to complete the mission reflects a *normative imperative* that the Platoon Leader himself imposes on the situation. That is, it reflects his strong sense of obligation to complete the mission.

This obligation to complete the mission is reflected in the Platoon Leader's use of imperative language: "[we] are going to complete this mission...no matter what" and "that's just how it's going to be" as a matter of "fact" that is not open to question. This language suggests a sense of urgency that manifests in two distinct imperatives: a negative imperative in which there are certain actions he "won't do" and a positive imperative in which there are certain actions he "must do." For the Platoon Leader, the negative imperative that he won't do is call his commander and tell him, "Basically sir, I can't do this mission"; the positive imperative that he must do is complete the mission. These imperatives are complementary and reciprocal. When the Platoon Leader declares that "not completing the mission is not an option," it carries with it the reciprocal implication that "[we] are going to do this mission... no matter what." The normative imperative to complete the mission is thus revealed not merely by the leader's positive actions ("must do" imperatives), but also by the actions he does not take ("won't do" imperatives). The normative imperative to complete the mission thus involves both positive as well as negative obligations.

***Taking care of soldiers.***

As an NCO, your number one job is to take care of your soldiers. If you cannot do that then you do not deserve to be a leader. That's what we're all out here for, to take care of them and make sure they can do their jobs. If you're in it for yourself, then you don't deserve to be a leader and you need to go. I think a lot of people

lose focus at times, worried about their own awards, worried about their [performance evaluations], and things like that. Those pieces of paper mean nothing to me. If you can't accomplish your job out here by taking care of your soldiers, then you can pack it in.... I've demonstrated that with my leadership in the past, where I will remove someone from a position and put someone in there that can [take care of soldiers], because I do not have the time, and the soldiers don't have the time for you to waste if you can't do your job. (Platoon Sergeant)

The second driving purpose of leadership in combat is to take care of soldiers.

Taking care of soldiers refers to ensuring the welfare of soldiers, including ensuring they are properly trained and ready to complete missions as well as more mundane responsibilities such as ensuring soldiers are getting paid, staying healthy, and staying connected with family back home. Taking care of soldiers has a similar sacrosanct and imperative quality as completing the mission that manifests in a similar strong sense of obligation as illustrated in the Platoon Sergeant's quote above.

The Platoon Sergeant declares as a matter of fact that, "As an NCO, your number one job is to take care of soldiers" and follows this with a strong condemnation of leaders who put their self-interests above the interests of soldiers: "If you're in it for yourself, then you don't deserve to be a leader and you need to go." Here again is the reciprocal positive "must do" and negative "won't do" imperative language. However, the Platoon Sergeant also invokes a motivational criterion that goes deeper than surface-level behavioral compliance. It is not enough for a leader to behave in a way that is consistent with the standard; the leader must also have the appropriate underlying motivation. He must not be "in it for himself"; he must genuinely have the best interests of his soldiers at heart and put them ahead of his own interests.

The Platoon Sergeant emphasizes this deeper motivational criterion when he states, “I think a lot of people lose focus at times, worried about their own awards, worried about their [performance evaluations], and things like that. Those pieces of paper mean nothing to me.” This comment suggests a strong evaluative contrast between leaders who are “in it for themselves” and their awards and performance appraisals and those leaders who are committed to their soldiers and for whom awards and appraisals “mean nothing.” The Platoon Sergeant condemns those leaders who are “in it for themselves” as unworthy and undeserving of being a leader. This evaluation is decisive. It suggests no wiggle room, caveats or qualifications. It is categorical: “If you’re in it for yourself, then you don’t deserve to be a leader and you need to go.” Thus, normative imperative to take care of soldiers demands more from leaders than mere behavioral compliance; it demands that leaders be motivated to take care of soldiers for the right reasons – that their career interests are subordinate to the welfare of their soldiers.

***Leading from the front.***

Do I like walking point everywhere? No. But do I think I have to do it? Yes, because I have to lead from the front. That’s old school [non-commissioned officer (NCO)] stuff ... but it’s what being an NCO is all about. I had a platoon sergeant in Iraq; he would always walk point and that’s just something that stuck with me. I’m always walking in front of my guys and they see it and I think it’s important. But not only am I supposed to do those things. I have to do those things. Because if I don’t do them, how can I expect my guys to do them? I don’t expect my soldiers to do something that I wouldn’t do. I wouldn’t send my guys out there to do something I wouldn’t. (Squad Leader)

A common stereotype of military leaders is that of a highly directive if not authoritarian leader who issues orders in a “top-down” hierarchical fashion and who expects followers’ unquestioning obedience. This stereotype is not without some truth



especially in combat where situations sometimes arise that require highly directive leadership in response to urgent contingencies. However, my observations of leaders in this study suggest that this hierarchical stereotype is more the exception rather than the rule. Although my leader informants typically do hold superior hierarchical rank and formal position, they tend to not rely on this in the day-in-day out practice of leading. That is, they do not emphasize leading from the *top* by exercising their formal authority to give orders in a top-down hierarchical manner. What they do rely most heavily on is leading from the *front* by sharing hardship and danger of combat with their soldiers and setting an example for them that motivates their soldiers to follow, not because they *have to*, but because they *want to*. This is what it means to lead from the front.

The Squad Leader quoted above illustrates this normative standard to lead from the front using the example of walking point. Walking point on mission involves significant responsibility and risk. The “point man” is located at the very front of the patrol. He is responsible for guiding the rest of the soldiers through the terrain safely. He is also usually first to encounter any enemy threat or hazard, such as an improvised explosive device or ambush.

The Squad Leader in the quote above admits that he does not “like walking point everywhere.” And yet, despite the responsibility and risk, this particular squad leader made a habit of walking point on mission. To put this in proper context, it would be a legitimate and perhaps even prudent exercise of his formal authority to task one of his soldiers with walking point. This would allow him to “follow in trace” from a more secure position in the middle of the patrol. Yet the Squad Leader does not take advantage

of his formal authority in this way because he felt it was “important” for his soldiers to see him walking point; because “[he doesn’t] expect his soldiers to do something [he] wouldn’t do”; and because “[he] wouldn’t send [his] guys out there to do something [he] wouldn’t.”

In these comments, the Squad Leader expresses the importance and sense of obligation he attaches to leading from the *front*. His comments reveal the same positive “must do” and negative “won’t do” imperatives as the Platoon Leader and Platoon Sergeant analyzed above. What the Squad Leader feels he “must do” is walk point because what he “won’t do” is send his soldiers out to do something he wouldn’t do himself. This illustrates the normative imperative associated with leading from the front. This normative imperative involves sharing the hardship and danger of combat with soldiers and to do so in a way that sets an example for them to follow.

**Summary.** Combat leadership is a social practice governed by certain standards. Three standards constitute the primary organizing norms that govern the practice of leadership: complete the mission, take care of soldiers and lead from the front. Embedded in leaders’ understandings of these standards is a strong normative orientation characterized by three distinct features. First is a strong sense of urgency involving two reciprocal dynamics: a negative imperative in which there are certain actions that leaders “won’t do”; and a positive imperative in which there are certain actions that leaders feel they “must do.” Second is a deep motivational criterion that extends beyond mere behavioral compliance with the standard. This motivational criterion generally demands that leaders subordinate self-interests to the interests of the mission and their soldiers.

Third, this normative orientation demands that leaders minimize reliance on their formal hierarchical authority—i.e., leading from the “top.” Instead, these standards demand that leaders share in the hardship and danger of combat with soldiers and to do so in a way that sets an example for them to follow—i.e., leading from the “front.”

In sum, these leadership standards are highly normative in that they make strong claims on leaders: They reflect the accepted values and principles of combat leadership; they carry moral significance; they are authoritative; and they command and obligate leaders to certain courses of action, e.g., completing the mission, taking care of soldiers, and leading from the front. They thus define what it means to be a combat leader; they establish the essential criteria for the practice of leadership in combat including notions of warranted conduct that gain a leader merit, praise, or honor as well as notions of unwarranted conduct that are regarded as bad, wrong, or intolerable.

Standards of leadership constitute the first contextual factor that bears significantly on the concept of leader character emergent in this study. Juxtaposed against these standards is the adversity of combat which constitutes the second contextual factor that bears significantly on leader character. In the next section, I describe the empirical themes and categories associated with the adversity of combat.

**Adversity of combat.** Combat is an environment characterized by adversity. Adversity consists of the inexorable forces that stand in the way of efforts to accomplish missions and tasks, take care of soldiers and otherwise make the experience of combat dangerous and difficult. Adversity manifests in manifold ways: in the acute fright felt during an intense firefight and the chronic anxiety of persistent risk and danger; in the

intense strain of a difficult mission, the persistent stress of a high operational tempo, and the monotony of routine and tedious tasks; and in the hardship of austere living conditions and the loneliness of being separated from home, family, and friends. Adversity in its manifold forms dominates the combat environment. It is permanent and pervasive. It is inherent to combat; it is not of soldiers own making; all soldiers are subject to it. It operates across the entire spectrum of combat activities, both “inside the wire” and “outside the wire.” Adversity makes simple tasks hard and acts to constantly undermine motivation and morale. It has a cumulative and corrosive effect on my informants morale and motivation. For these reasons, my informants refer to the environment of combat simply as “the suck.”

Figure 5.3 below graphically depicts the data structure associated with the adversity of combat. The data suggest two second order themes associated with adversity: the trauma and the tedium of combat. Below, I elaborate the empirical categories associated with the trauma and tedium of combat.

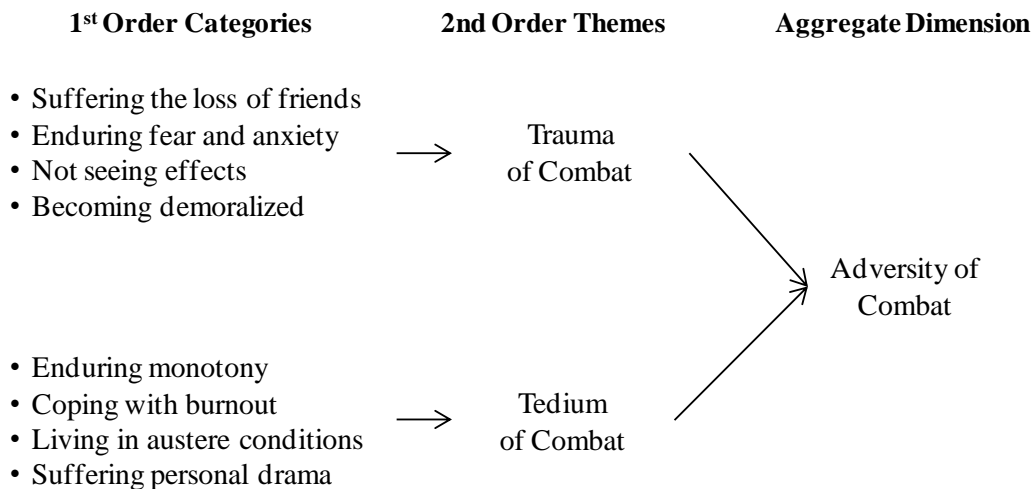


Figure 5.3. The adversity of combat.

*The tedium of combat.* Combat, as one of my informants expressed, is “90 percent waiting and 5 percent getting there, and then another 5 percent doing it.” “Doing it” refers to actual TICs or firefights; “getting there” refers to the physical movement to and from objectives during missions; and “waiting” refers to everything else that occupies a soldier’s time. From this perspective, the majority of soldiers’ time in combat—95 percent by one informant’s estimate—is spent engaged in activities other than firefights. The adversity associated with this “95 percent” I refer to as the “tedium of combat.”

The tedium of combat concerns those forms of adversity that we less frequently associate with combat and yet constitutes a significant challenge for soldiers. It involves things such as enduring the monotony of routine tasks and missions, coping with the physical and mental fatigue of difficult missions and chronic strain of a high-operational tempo, dealing with the hardship of austere living conditions as well as suffering “personal drama” of being separated from family and friends and “missing life” back home, e.g., birthdays, weddings, graduations, deaths, etc.

*Enduring monotony.* The majority of missions soldiers execute in combat are routine and monotonous. A typical mission I experienced was what is called a *key leader engagement* (KLE). This is a patrol to a local village to meet with the elders to address various social and economic needs of the village or solicit involvement in governance initiatives. The actual KLE with the village elders is conducted by an officer, typically the company commander or other officer. Most KLEs are uneventful, monotonous but taxing missions for my informants. They involve a foot movement to the village that

may take upwards of three or four hours; “pulling security” for one or two hours while the KLE is conducted; and then a three- to four-hour foot movement back to the COP. Most KLEs involve no combat with the enemy and the biggest challenge for my informants is simply coping with the monotony and fatigue of the mission.

Under these conditions, it is easy for soldiers to become complacent—to become absorbed with the physical and mental fatigue of the mission and lose focus on the actual or potential danger and threat. Even though the typical mission involves no combat with the enemy, it happens and seemingly when least expected. The tendency therefore to become complacent in the face of routine and monotony represents dominant form of adversity that characterizes the tedium of combat.

Becoming complacent in the face of routine and monotony is one of my informants’ biggest concerns. My informants talk continuously about the need to “fight complacency.” The two quotes below from two Squad Leaders are illustrative of the challenge posed by routine and monotony and the tendency to become complacent:

Walking down a trail for the last six months, never been hit there, thinking you’re safe—why check for IEDs? The enemy fights on their time and terrain and you’re the best TV they have. You can’t get complacent. You have to keep vigilant, stay alert. (Squad Leader)

The missions they give us sometimes—they’ll place us in the same spots; we’re watching the same thing. Then they’ll kind of put us on goose egg hunts, like, “Oh this happened here so now we’re going to go over here and try to deal with it.” And then when we get there nothing happens. So just keeping the guys motivated is a big leadership challenge; keeping the guys focused and keeping them from getting complacent. (Squad Leader)

*Coping with burnout.* Juxtaposed against the complacency triggered by the routine and monotony of combat is the burnout resulting from a high operational tempo

that requires my informants to execute a high number of missions with little rest in between. The platoons with which I embedded operate on a three-phase rotational cycle. The first phase is “mission cycle” in which the platoon is the designated lead platoon for all missions. The second phase is “guard cycle” in which the platoon is responsible for providing security for the COP. The third phase is “rest cycle” in which the platoon is supposed to have “downtime” to rest and recuperate from mission and guard cycles. Under normal circumstances, a phase lasts a week to 10 days.

However, “normal” circumstances are rare in combat. Unforeseen contingencies and “last minute” missions and taskings from “higher” frequently increase the number of missions platoons must execute, extend missions cycles and cause rest cycles to be interrupted or cut short. Often, rest cycle is eliminated as platoons are designated as “support platoon” that requires them to execute missions in a support role for the lead platoon. This dramatically increases the operational tempo and demands placed on my informants. To illustrate the demands of this high operational tempo, a platoon leader informant stated that he executed 170 missions in his first six months on deployment. This averages almost one mission a day. His experience was typical of my informants.

Under such a high operational tempo, burnout becomes a significant form of adversity with which my informants must contend. Burnout results from the exhaustion of executing physically and mentally taxing missions with little or no rest in between. One platoon leader described the effects of burnout on one of his best squad leaders this

way: “We’re at month eight; complacency is internal. One of my squad leaders is a Silver Star winner.<sup>1</sup> He’s burned out and ready to get out of the Army.”

*Living in austere conditions.* The fatigue of this grueling operational pace is aggravated by austere living conditions. On the COP, my informants lack basic “creature comforts” such as showers, hot water, good food, or even comfortable sleeping areas that would allow soldiers to relax and recuperate after missions. The high operational tempo combined with austere living conditions tends to not only exhaust my informants physically, but it also has regressive effects on their morale that manifests in a negative, agitated attitude. The squad leaders quoted below describe the conditions that contribute to burnout.

It’s easy to get burned out here. It’s physically demanding. We don’t have the niceties—mail, decent food, showers, etc. It’s aggravated by high [operational] tempo. Guys get a negative attitude toward missions. They start talking about going home all the time and going on leave. They start snapping at wives, girlfriends, family etc. It’s difficult to keep guys motivated. (Squad Leader)

The living conditions are horrible. We get lousy sleep because we’re on mission at night, and during the day, it’s too hot to sleep because we don’t have AC. We have no showers; we constantly run out of food; and we constantly take [indirect fire]. We basically have few comforts. We constantly complain about the living conditions. It’s a morale defeater. (Squad Leader)

Adding significantly to the problem of burnout is the extended duration (12 months) of the combat deployment over which these conditions must be endured. My informants describe how during the first few months of deployment, they operate at peak performance. After that, mental and physical fatigue begins to set in. They describe hitting a low point midway through deployment in which the effects of fatigue and

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<sup>1</sup> The Silver Star Medal is our nation’s third highest military decoration for valor.



burnout are significant and yet the end of deployment and the return home is still a long way off. A Platoon Leader describes it this way:

Twelve months is a long time. It wears you down. It takes you two months to learn the [area of operations]. Then you have four months when you're operating at your peak. After that, the challenge is keeping guys healthy and focused. At about month six, guys get really tired; it feels like there is no end in sight for deployment. Some guys are on their third, fourth, fifth deployment. You can see burnout setting in. (Platoon Leader)

*Suffering personal drama.* The last form of adversity related to the tedium of combat is what some of my informants describe as the “personal drama” of being deployed. Personal drama refers to the adversity of being away from friends and family for an extended period, as well as the challenges of dealing with personal problems that arise, such as the infidelity of girlfriends and wives or financial difficulties. For young soldiers, being away from family and friends for 12 months is a long time; they get homesick.

My soldiers are young. It's their first deployment. They're used to their own little bubble in the “real world” back home. But out here, we're cut off; we're out at some remote COP in the middle of nowhere. The COP is like a prison—we live on this little plot of land surrounded by HESCOs and C-Wire and guard towers. You have little downtime and no privacy. You have to make sure they keep up their communication with their family and stay connected. (Platoon Leader)

One year is a long time for my soldiers. They get homesick. They think about their peers back at college; they think the grass is greener and wish they were back home, or at college. (Platoon Leader)

Like you got two guys who are going through a divorce, really young guys, you know, like 19, 20. [They] got married while on leave, came back, [and] by now their wives now are cheating on them and now it's taking their head out of the game. And literally, you know, we got to talk to them and make sure they stay with their head in the game. So I think one of the biggest challenges is their family back home, especially if they're married and they're going through a divorce. I know that's pretty rough. (Platoon Sergeant)

Personal drama is described as the “big white elephant in the room”—the unseen cost of deployment that affects soldiers on their first deployment and perhaps more significantly, leaders who have multiple deployments. These leaders describe “missing a lot of life”—births, deaths, anniversaries, graduations, and important milestones in life that they’ll never get back. A platoon sergeant described missing the senior year of high school of his only daughter: “How much of life is lost because you’re not there that you’ll never get back?”

Complacency from routine and monotony, burnout from high operational tempo and austere living conditions, and personal drama from being away from family and friends—these forms of adversity represent the tedium of combat. They are best understood as a kind of chronic friction that makes the day-in-day-out living and working in combat difficult. However, although this chronic tedium characterizes “95 percent” of the adversity experienced by my informants, it is punctuated by acute episodes of intense adversity. These episodes involve firefights or “TICs” (Troops-in-Contact). Firefights constitute the other “5 percent” of adversity I refer to as the trauma of combat.

*The trauma of combat.* Firefights invoke traumatic forms of adversity commonly associated with combat, such as the intense fear that SSG K described in the Introduction to this study as well as significant emotional stress, such as suffering the loss of a close friend. The traumatic adversity of combat also includes the latent effects of dealing with the constant fear and anxiety from being in an environment of constant risk and danger, as well as frustrations associated with the unique demands of the counterinsurgency in which my informants were engaged. I label these forms of adversity traumatic because

they tend to affect soldiers on a deep psychological level and involve significant emotional stress, both acute and chronic.

*Suffering the loss of friends.* Suffering the loss of a close friend in combat constitutes a significant form of emotional adversity. One informant described the difficulty of dealing with the loss of friends in combat this way:

Emotionally, seeing my buddies get hurt is the biggest challenge. Mac, Powell, and McElvane—I went to Basic with these guys and just knowing what happened is a very painful memory. It leaves a really shitty feeling seeing one of your buddies laid out and you can't really do anything about it because somebody's got you pinned down with a [machine gun] and if anybody goes out there, they're going to be in that exact same spot. (Team Leader)

The team leader in the quote above describes seeing his “buddies get hurt” as his “biggest challenge.” To lose close friends is a “painful memory” that leaves him with a “shitty feeling.” The emotional trauma this Team Leader describes results in part from the fact that his “buddies [get] laid out” and he is powerless to “do anything about it” because he is “pinned down.” Experienced leaders are sensitive to these “significant emotional events.” They understand from personal experience the difficulty of dealing with this traumatic adversity. One squad leader described the challenge this way:

Dealing with casualties is tough. For some of the seasoned guys, they may know how to cope with it, but for the younger guys, they struggle with it. Some of them just want to go back out and get revenge and that's one thing that we try to avoid because that's really not going to help the situation at all. For some of the other guys, they have a sense of withdrawal—and not just the younger guys, but it also goes for some of the leaders. You've just seen one of your soldiers get wounded and now you're more nervous about going out the wire because you don't want to see the same thing happening to somebody else. (Squad Leader)

The Squad Leader in this quote describes the different reactions soldiers have to casualties: some get angry and want to “get back out and get revenge”; others experience

a “sense of withdrawal” and become “more nervous about going back out [on mission] because [they] don’t want to see the same thing [happen] to somebody else.”

Experienced leaders feel these same emotions, but have learned to control them. They have come to understand that these reactions are “not going to help the situation at all.” Leaders describe the need to control these emotions and stay strong for their soldiers, but this is “tough.”

*Enduring fear and anxiety.* The second traumatic form of adversity—fear and anxiety—derives from the first. Much of what happens in combat is beyond anyone’s direct control. Who becomes a casualty and who does not seems a matter of chance: being in the wrong place at the wrong time—when an IED explodes; when the enemy attacks with an RPG, mortar, or small arms fire; or when an enemy sniper aims in on a target. Having your life depend on chance is stressful and manifests in chronic feelings of fear and anxiety. A Company First Sergeant described this chronic manifestation of fear this way:

Fear is probably one of the biggest challenges. Going on missions everyday you don’t know if you’re going to get hit by a dismounted [improvised explosive device (IED)], [rocket propelled grenade (RPG)], mortar, small arms fire, a sniper. I mean everyday you leave the wire it’s the fear that you could be the next one to get hit. After missions you get to decompress for a bit, but you know that you’re going back out on a mission and the stress starts to build again. You get worried; you get wondering if you’re going to be the next guy to get hit.  
(Company First Sergeant)

The First Sergeant describes a mental cycle in which after completing a mission, soldiers are able to “decompress for a bit,” but this decompression is short-lived and the fear and anxiety begins to “build again” as attention turns to the next mission to be executed the next day and “wondering if you’re going to be the next guy to get hit.”

Fear in combat is permanent and pervasive. It includes the acute fright experienced during a firefight as well as the chronic anxiety that weighs on soldiers day-in and day-out. For leaders, this chronic fear and anxiety weighs extra heavy because they feel personally responsible as leaders for the safety of their soldiers. A Platoon Leader described this extra stress this way:

I would say just being really stressed out, taking people out every day and hoping that they don't die, to be honest with you, which I would also say is probably the hardest thing about doing route clearance for 12 months. Obviously when you're deployed you're going to be stressed out, but this is definitely a different kind of stress having to go out every day and pretty much make sure everyone comes back all right. (Platoon Leader)

The Platoon Leader leads a Route Clearance Platoon responsible for clearing roads of IEDs. As a platoon leader, she feels a deep sense of personal responsibility for the lives of her soldiers and making "sure everyone comes back all right." This is an expression of her felt sense of obligation to take care of her soldiers as described above. However, associated with this obligation is a feeling of being "really stressed out" from having to take her soldiers out every day and "hoping that they don't die." She alludes to the cumulative effect of this stress over the course of a 12-month deployment. She describes this stress as "definitely a different kind of stress."

*Not seeing effects of missions.* Aggravating the effects of suffering the loss of close friends and enduring chronic fear and anxiety is the fact that my informants seldom see tangible positive effects of the missions they execute. The counterinsurgency (COIN) in which my informants were engaged is described in Army doctrine as a small unit leader's fight. However, executing COIN operations is complex, demanding, and tedious. There are no simple or quick "wins." Weeks and even months worth of

missions will be dedicated to building a well or a playground for a village only to have the enemy destroy it a short time later. Progress at the tactical level is thus elusive and fragile. Below are some representative quotes:

We don't see the effects of what we've done. On the [Combat Outpost (COP)], it's easy to see the results of what you've done—filling HESCOs, building up the COP. But in the COIN fight, it's hard to see effects.... It's like *Groundhog Day*. We kill 10 bad guys and they just come back. It's not like we landed on Normandy and are pushing the Germans back. (Team Leader)

We're trying to get the people to take over the government and get the [Afghan National Army (ANA)] to step up and take over security. We have to get rid of the Taliban and win the people, but it's more difficult than we think. The challenge is establishing a more dominant presence. We don't have enough troops. The Taliban undoes everything we do. We don't see the improvements that higher sees. My Soldiers are frustrated. (Squad Leader)

We have too many restrictions. We can't go into houses. Going in a house allows you to interact with the locals. We used it to our advantage in Iraq. Here, the enemy uses the fact that we can't to their advantage. The main challenge we have to overcome is delivering on our promises. For example, we promise projects—like building, a new school, or a well or whatever. But we're not able to deliver because we can't get the money, or the supplies, or the contractor is corrupt, or something. We're not actually able to do what we say. Then the Taliban comes in and says that we're here for the short term and can't deliver on what we promise. (Squad Leader)

The above quotes highlight some of the key sources of frustration associated with COIN and not seeing the effects of missions. In the first quote, the Team Leader likens COIN to *Groundhog Day* (referring to the popular movie by that title): “We kill 10 bad guys and they just come back. It's not like we landed on Normandy and are pushing the Germans back.” In COIN, there is no tangible sense of progress, no sense of accomplishment. In the next quote, the Squad Leader picks up on this theme: “We don't see the improvements that higher sees”; “The Taliban undoes everything we do.” He emphasizes how his soldiers are frustrated. This lack of any real sense of progress was

succinctly summed up by another Squad Leader: “I can’t honestly say if we’re being successful. The fact that I can’t tell, probably means we’re not. It feels like a stalemate.”

*Becoming demoralized and disengaged.* The failure to see positive effects of their efforts undermines soldiers’ confidence in the mission which strikes at the core standard of the combat leader ethic as discussed above. My informants describe becoming demoralized, losing their personal sense of purpose and direction and disengaging from the mission. Below are some representative quotes:

We don’t have a real mission. Why are we doing this? All the [Morale, Welfare and Recreation] niceties do not substitute for a clear mission. We want to be here so give us a clear mission and the resources we need to complete it. The [rules of engagement] need to change to change momentum out here. Right now, the enemy is winning and it’s because we tie our own hands. No one wants a Haditha. No one thinks it’s cool to kill civilians. That’s not why we’re here. We have a much more mature Army than that. We just want to be able to do what were trained. We want to take it to the enemy who’s taking it to us. (Squad Leader)

There’s so much more we could be doing. We make this fight so much harder than it needs to be. It’s frustrating and it’s stressful. Previous deployments we’ve done what we needed to do. This deployment, we’re doing all the wrong things; we’re doing what we need to do to fail. For the surge in Iraq, we focused on killing and capturing the insurgents; here we have no overall set of objectives. What’s the purpose? What’s the goal? We need answers for why we’re doing this and supporting reasons. We’re not getting them. (Squad Leader)

To me that doesn't make any sense. I think it’s a big morale issue across the board for everybody. It’s not getting any better. It affects us greatly. I think that’s one of the most—that's probably the biggest thing that does affect us. I mean the junior leaders, the platoon leader, and myself, we're probably the only ones that are keeping ourselves and our soldiers going. Like guys like me that deployed four or five times and have seen it and understand that things change and, you know, you try to back the higher decisions or, you know, where the orders come from, but I mean to a point it’s like when you can’t explain it yourself it gets hard to make the soldiers believe it, you know? (Platoon Sergeant)

The clear frustration expressed in all three quotes above is the lack of a clear sense of mission and objectives. The Squad Leader in the second quote states that “we

have no overall set of objectives.” He asks rhetorically, “What’s the purpose? What’s the goal?” The Squad Leader in the first quote makes the same point: “We don’t have a real mission. Why are we doing this?”

A second frustration expressed in these quotes is the sense that much of this lack of clarity of purpose and lack of success on the ground is self-inflicted by the Army itself. The Squad Leader in the second quote emphasizes that “There’s so much more we could be doing. We make this fight so much harder than it needs to be.” To this point, my informants frequently talk about the excessively strict rules of engagement as the Squad Leader in the first quote notes: “The [rules of engagement] need to change to change momentum out here. Right now the enemy is winning and it’s because we tie our own hands.” He further emphasizes that all the conveniences provided by [Morale, Welfare and Recreation] “do not substitute for a clear mission and the resources [they] need to complete it.”

The Platoon Sergeant in the third quote drives the point home: “it’s a big morale issue across the board for everybody.” “It affects [soldiers] greatly” and according to the Platoon Sergeant, is “probably the biggest thing that does affect [them].” Ultimately, the Platoon Sergeant, who is a veteran of multiple combat deployments, states frankly and pessimistically the problem he faces as a leader: “You try to back the higher decisions ... where the orders come from, but I mean to a point, it’s like when you can’t explain it yourself.”

**Summary.** Combat is an environment characterized by permanent and pervasive adversity: by the acute fear from an enemy attack, the chronic anxiety of persistent risk



and danger and the emotional stress of losing close friends; by the physical and mental fatigue of difficult missions, the persistent stress of a high operational tempo, and the monotony of routine and tedious tasks; and by the hardship of an austere environment and the loneliness separation from home, family, and friends. Though the more traumatic forms of adversity comprise just “5 percent” of my informants’ experiences, they exert a disproportionately negative impact on my informants. This is because it involves significant emotional and moral stress, both acute and chronic, that tends to impact them on a deep psychological level that is aggravated by the ambiguities and frustrations unique to counterinsurgency.

Nonetheless, in both its traumatic and tedious manifestations, adversity has a cumulative and corrosive effect on morale and motivation. Arguably more than any other human activity, continuous combat operations against a dangerous and elusive enemy in a harsh and alien environment over the course of a 12-month deployment takes a toll on soldiers, severely straining their physical, mental, and moral capacities. Under these conditions, besieged by the corrosive and cumulative effects of adversity, upholding the standards of leadership becomes a significant challenge for leaders. This challenge I refer to as the leader’s inner struggle. It constitutes the empirical focal point for understanding the concept of leader character emergent in this study and is the subject of the next section.

### **The leader’s inner struggle.**

Everyone has his own personal fight. It’s been a hell of a deployment.... You have to grow up fast, re-evaluate your life, realize that you’re not a kid anymore. Your first firefight opens your eyes to this. (Squad Leader)

The standards of leadership and the adversity of combat are countervailing forces acting on the leader that create the dialectical tension introduced in Figure 5.1 earlier. Inherent in this dialectical tension is the leader's inner struggle to uphold normative obligations in the face of the trauma and tedium of combat. The Squad Leader in the quote above describes this inner struggle as a "personal fight." Understanding how leaders' make sense of and resolve this inner struggle is central to understanding the character to lead.

The leader's inner struggle operates at two distinct levels: a surface level volitional struggle and a deep level normative struggle. Recall again situation involving SSG K in an ambush. I described this previously as a prototypical hard situation in which the adversity of combat and the standards of leadership conflict to demand difficult things of leaders. In this case, SSG K risked his life by low crawling up the hill under fire. He acknowledged feeling acute fear. He could have "hunkered down" to protect himself from the enemy fire as the rest of us did. Yet, he explained that as the "senior man" he felt he had to "lead from the front." The normative dimension of this struggle concerns how SSG K personally justifies risking his life to uphold the standards of leadership. The volitional dimension of this struggle concerns how SSG K controlled his fear to make his commitment to lead from the front effective in action by low crawling up the hill. I discuss each of these dimensions below.

***The volitional struggle.*** The surface volitional struggle concerns what leaders do when they lead: Do they yield to adversity or uphold standards? I describe this aspect of the leader's inner struggle as a volitional struggle because it is essentially a matter of

exercising self-control to inhibit impulse and affirm and make effective in action the obligation to uphold standards. The situation faced by SSG K reflects an extreme example in which the conflict between adversity and standards was acute. More often, however, volitional struggles take less intense even mundane forms.

For example, before missions, leaders will cut their sleep short so they can get themselves ready before their soldiers. This allows them to focus on supervising their soldiers and making sure they are “mission ready” when they get up. However, sleep in combat is precious. Leaders and soldiers labor through combat in a continuous state of sleep deprivation. So working against the leader getting up early before mission is the temptation to sleep longer—to stay “in the rack” and get an extra 15, 30, or 60 minutes of needed sleep. Similarly, after mission, when everyone is exhausted and just wants to get some food and go back to sleep, there is the need to first clean all weapons and gear and make sure everything is mission ready again.

These are two mundane or routine manifestations of the leader’s volitional struggle. Whereas the acute situations such as SSG K’s tend to be less frequent but very intense, the more mundane situations are less intense but chronic and pervasive. Almost everything a leader does from the routine and mundane to the difficult and intense is done in the face of some temptation, some impulse, or other form of adversity that must be resisted and overcome in order to uphold the standards associated with the action.

The dialectics inherent in these conflicts of will involve mixed-motive situations; that is, in any particular situation, a leader experiences conflicting motives moving him towards opposing courses of action: sleep or get up and get ready for mission; sleep or

clean weapons and gear; low crawl up a hill under fire or hunker down. These mixed-motives reflect the fundamental dialectics that define the volitional struggle: regardless of whether it is mundane or acute, it involves the fundamental problem of restraining the impulse to yield to the fear, fatigue, pain, suffering and frustration inflicted by the adversity of combat; and affirming in and through their actions, the normative purposes and standards leadership.

This is the essence of the volitional struggle. In the language of my informants, this inner struggle is described as the challenge between doing the “hard right over the easy wrong.” The significance of this struggle is succinctly captured by one of my informants, with emphasis added to “do,” highlighting the will and the volitional implications of the struggle:

It’s probably one of the hardest things to do, but you have to always try to do that hard right over the easy wrong...I mean, it’s like one of those things you’d read straight out of the old school manual on leadership. But, I mean, at the heart of it, it’s true because that’s what a leader has to do.

***The normative struggle.*** However, the leader’s inner struggle is not limited to this surface level manifestation. In combat, leaders frequently face situations that are hard: when they face a difficult and grave choice; when they must risk their life for the sake of the mission or his soldiers; when they must confront and overcome profound fears and base impulses. The firefight is the prototypical example of just such a “hard” situation. The reality of such “hard” situations invokes a deeper level inner struggle that goes beyond surface level volition. The Squad Leader quoted at the introduction to this section alludes to this deeper struggle when he describes how the experience of combat requires one to “grow up,” “re-evaluate [their] life,” “realize [they’re] not a kid

anymore.” I refer to this aspect of the leader’s inner struggle as a normative struggle because it involves a more basic coming to terms with the normative demands of imposed by the standards of leadership that penetrates into the deep structure of the leader’s fundamental values and beliefs. To illustrate, consider the following quote from a Platoon Leader:

After we lost SGT M, it really made me realize—what’s the point of going to these villages? What’s the point of coming here getting into a fight and coming back home? What does it really do? Does it really help the population feel more secure? Is it really going to help me get home any faster? Is it? ... I mean does it help my troops out in any sort of way?... I guess it’s hard for me to actually see that all the time.... Yeah, I got it. There are losses in war and that’s kind of how it is and it sucks. It’s a shitty part of our job. But I don’t feel like it’s always justified. I would never trade SGT M for a 100 or a 1,000 Afghans. (Platoon Leader)

The Platoon Leader just suffered the loss of one of his Squad Leaders, SGT M, who was killed while leading his soldiers “from the front” during a firefight. In the immediate aftermath of this “significant emotional event,” the Platoon Leader is questioning whether SGT M’s loss was worth it: “What’s the point?” “What does it really do?” The Platoon Leader’s struggle here is not whether SGT M did the “hard right”—he did. Rather the Platoon Leader’s struggle involves a more fundamental search for a justification for SGT M’s sacrifice. Specifically, if the standards of leadership demand that a leader be willing to risk and even sacrifice his life in the face of adversity, then there ought to be a reason strong enough to justify the leader’s sacrifice. To this end, the Platoon Leader recognizes that being a combat leader means accepting loss—“there are losses in war and that’s kind of how it is and it sucks.” But he does not feel that the

losses are “always justified.” On the contrary, he “would not trade SGT M for a 100 or a 1,000 Afghans.”

The Platoon Leader’s quote captures the essence of the normative struggle. It concerns not surface level judgments about whether a leader did what he ought to do in a particular situation, i.e. whether a leader did the hard right. But it concerns a more fundamental questioning in the face of suffering and sacrifice, whether doing the hard right is worth it in the first place. This is what philosophers call the “normative question” (Korsgaard, 2010, p. 9). The normative question involves an evaluation of the demands imposed by the standards of leadership. How leaders like the Platoon Leader quoted above answer the normative question emerged as central to understanding the deep structure of leader character in combat.

To this end, one of the most significant observations informing the concept of character emergent in this study is that my leader informants so often and so consistently uphold standards in the face of adversity, even at risk and sometimes loss of their life. Though at times they fail to do what leadership demands, more often and especially in the “hard” situations, I observed leaders like SSG K doing the “hard right” despite adversity and personal risk. The character of the leader is reflected by his capacity to consistently act in such a way that he successfully resists the impulse to yield to the adversity of combat and uphold the standards of leadership. Thus, understanding how my informants resolve both the normative and volitional dimensions of this inner struggle is central to understanding the character to lead and is the focus of the remainder of these findings.

## **The Character to Lead**

Leader performance in combat is characterized by the willingness to sacrifice in upholding normative standards in the face of adversity. Character is posited to be the decisive factor that explains this strong form of leader agency. The right half of Figure 5.1 above depicts the core empirical features of the character to lead. An agentic structure is depicted in which the focal construct is identity-conferring normative commitments that manifest in certain characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines. These constructs capture the psychological structure of character that explains the strong form of leader agency exhibited by my informants—the willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity. In this section, I present the findings associated with the agentic structure of the character to lead including the empirical themes and categories associated with identity commitments, characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines. But first, I begin with an in-depth introspective analysis of the normative question introduced above.

**The normative question.** In answering the normative question, I seek to understand more deeply how the normative standards of leadership are integrated into the fabric of a leader's character such that he is willing to uphold them under the most adverse conditions and even at risk to his life (Korsgaard, 2010). To be clear, what I am seeking or asking is what justifies the normative demands that these standards make on leaders from a first-person perspective. Reconsider, for instance, SSG K's example of low crawling up a hill under enemy fire. The very real risk of this action is that SSG K could be killed. Nonetheless, SSG K felt that taking this risk was necessary—something

he had to do in order to lead from the front. This situation exemplifies the practical implications of the normative question: If SSG K believes that leading from the front demands that he face death on a hill in Afghanistan rather than take some other action, then he ought to have a reason compelling enough to justify his willingness to sacrifice his life in this way.

The answer to the normative question is not a third-person theoretical explanation, but rather requires a first-person justification from the perspective of the person who must actually do what the standards demand. For example, a theorist may explain SSG K's behavior as the manifestation of a primal moral instinct that helps preserve the species or the group. This evolutionary theoretical explanation may be true from a distal third-person perspective, but from a proximal first-person perspective, SSG K is not thinking about "preservation of the species" when he commits himself to low crawling up the hill under fire. The first-person answer to the normative question seeks to know why or how SSG K *himself* justifies his action to *himself*? How does *he* explain or understand his willingness to sacrifice his life to uphold the standards of leadership?

To answer this question, to find the first-person self-justification I am looking for, I must put myself in the position of a leader on whom the standards are making a difficult demand. I must put myself in SSG K's boots at the time he faced the situation when he felt he "[had] to lead from the front" by low crawling up the hill under fire. From this insider's perspective, the normative question asks: Do I really have to lead from the front? Why do I have to low crawl up this hill under fire? Why do I have to risk my life? The answer to these questions from the first-person perspective of the leader is the



explanation that I am looking for. It is from this insider's perspective—the inner life of the leader—that the insights into the deep structure of leader character can be gleaned.

*Introspective insights.* My own first-person experience as a combat participant provides critical insights into the explanation I am seeking. My research for this study took me from being a doctoral student at Arizona State University to accepting a commission as an officer in the U.S. Army and then deploying all the way to Afghanistan and into combat for six months. Once in Afghanistan, I pushed out to combat outposts, embedded with infantry platoons, and proceeded to go on combat missions as a participant observer. Though I was aware of the danger, I never seriously questioned what I was doing or the personal risk I was taking. That changed during one combat patrol on September 16 while I was embedded with SSG K. During a particularly dangerous portion of this mission, I confronted the reality of what I was doing and experienced an unexpected moment of piercing self-doubt and almost paralyzing fear. The excerpt below is from my field journal capturing my reflections about this moment.

*Field journal entry: 16 September 2010 – Kherwar Valley.*

Today, I was walking point with SSG K again. We were pursuing the enemy we have been engaged with over the last week. The other squad on the mission flushed the enemy out of a village and we suspected they were in a river bed 500 meters to our front. As we moved towards the enemy across a crusty unplowed farm field, I realized that we had no cover and that if the enemy was in the river bed, we would be easy targets. The lethality of the firefights of the last several days flashed through my mind. At that moment, the reality of my situation hit me hard: I could be shot and killed any moment; these could be the last steps of my life. Here I am on combat patrol walking point in a remote part of Afghanistan far from my family: What the hell am I doing out here?!

Here I confronted a situation in which I had to address the normative question in a deep personal way. At that moment, I *really* did not want to be out there anymore on

patrol risking my life. I remember thinking that I did not want to die on that god-forsaken field; I wanted to see my family again; I wanted to live. Yet I felt I had to keep walking point with SSG K. I recall my legs feeling weak as I physically struggled to keep walking. Why did I feel compelled to keep walking point?

My own personal reflection on why I felt compelled to keep walking point reveals several insights important to the agentic structure of leader character depicted in Figure 5.1. First, I felt a strong personal responsibility to continue mission. I was an Army officer and though my official duties did not require me to be there with those soldiers on that mission, the soldiers with whom I was embedded had come to expect me to be there. They knew I was doing research for my dissertation, but they also saw me as an Army officer and a Major. For them, this is a significant rank; I out-ranked their troop commander who was a Captain. Soldiers have certain expectations of officers and especially those they consider more senior. Among these expectations is that they are “standard bearers”—they set the example when it comes to the leadership standards. For me to fall out on this mission would have failed their legitimate expectations of me, not as a researcher, but as an Army officer. My sense of personal responsibility prohibited me from allowing this to happen; I was determined not to fail these soldiers. I felt I owed it to them to keep walking, to risk my life just as they were risking theirs, and to complete the mission “no matter what.” The feeling I felt is the moral force of *ought*—the strong compulsion to fulfill the obligations associated with my role as an Army officer that I legitimately owed these soldiers. In short, I felt *duty-bound* to continue walking point.

Second, I felt I had something to prove. Combat for many of my informants including me is a test—perhaps the ultimate test—of one’s mettle, of one’s character, of one’s inherent worth as a man. I had been in combat before, even decorated for valor. But that was years ago—what seemed like a lifetime ago. The soldiers with whom I was embedded didn’t know me then and they barely knew me now. In the few weeks that I had been embedded with them, I had come to know and respect these soldiers and had worked hard to earn their respect and trust. They in turn had begun to accept me into their “family.” This was important not just so that I could establish the necessary rapport with my informants for my research; it was important on a deep personal level. It indicated that I had met the “standard,” that I had proved myself to them and re-affirmed my self-worth as a combat soldier and leader. In short, I not only felt duty-bound, but *honor-bound* to keep walking point.

A felt sense of duty and honor constitute the first two insights into my compulsion to keep walking point. Duty and honor capture two characteristic motivations of leaders in combat. By characteristic motivation I mean a basic tendency to be moved to act for certain kinds of reasons. Duty as a characteristic motivation is about what a leader *owes*; it reflects the importance leaders attach to fulfilling certain normative obligations and responsibilities. Honor as a characteristic motivation is about what a leader *earns*; it reflects the importance leaders attach to proving themselves worthy of respect by achieving certain normative aspirations and ideals. These two characteristic motivations constitute a critical aspect of the agentic structure of leader character in combat.

In this particular moment, I was tested in a profound and decisive way. I was inexplicably besieged by fear and foreboding. I felt an almost desperate need to be done with this mission and out of harm's way. Yet, in confronting this intense fear and foreboding, I felt an equally desperate need to not only *not* fail my duty to these soldiers and also to prove to myself and them that I was worthy of their respect and trust. However, this begs the further question of why these notions of duty and honor had such a command over me? Why was I so concerned about fulfilling my responsibilities and earning respect that I was willing to risk my life?

My answer to this phenomenon is elusive. But I glean insights by contemplating the implications if I had not continued mission—if I had given in to my fear and “fallen out” of that movement. My sense is that the shame, guilt, and disappointment would be difficult to bear. The notion of having to live the rest of my life knowing that when it mattered most, when it was most difficult, I failed my duty to those soldiers and brought dishonor upon myself is to this day, a somewhat frightening proposition—perhaps worse than death. And this is the crux of the matter—the critical insight into the answer I am seeking to the normative question: The self-importance I attached to duty and honor justified risking my life by continuing to walk point across that god-forsaken field, because the alternative would have been worse than death. That is, to phrase this insight in terms of the normative question, if upholding the normative standards are ever worth dying for, then violating them must be, in a similar way, worse than death. And this means that they must be embedded with the leader's sense of who he is. In this respect, duty and honor are closely tied to one's sense of identity and reflect the deep-level sense

of what is most important, those aspects of one's self that are foundational to one's self-understanding. They reflect the basic, most fundamental commitments that define a person's sense of self. This notion is captured by the normative commitments that are identity-conferring and constitute the focal construct in the character to lead.

My identity-conferring commitment to duty and honor motivated me to continue the mission and keep walking point with SSG K. I felt I had no real choice if I was to remain true to my sense of duty and honor. Yet, to follow through on my sense of duty and honor required no small amount of self-control. My fear never diminished as we crossed that field. Each step was difficult; each step I took with deliberate effort against a strong impulse not to and even over physical weakness in my legs. This is the volitional aspect of the struggle I faced—to follow through and persist in acting on my sense of duty and honor required me to exercise self-control or what my informants discipline. This volitional discipline constitutes the fourth insight informing the agentic structure of leader character depicted in Figure 5.1.

Fortunately, as it turned out, the enemy was not in the riverbed. We were spared what could have been a costly firefight. Nonetheless, looking back, I feel a deep sense of self-respect and pride that in that moment when it was most difficult, I proved responsible and worthy. This is the experience of value that is unique to combat—a deep life affirming experience of moral self-worth that emerges when one faces one's deepest existential fears and by bringing personal influence to bear on these fears in the form of self-control, overcomes these fears in service to a cause “bigger than yourself.” This

experience of value affirms and reinforces the normative commitments that define one's self-identity.

In sum, the first-person justification that explains the willingness to sacrifice in upholding the normative standards of leadership in the face of adversity can be explained by several key factors: (1) the leader's identity-conferring commitment to being a leader in combat that (2) manifests in two characteristic motivations—duty and honor; and (3) the volitional discipline to follow through and realize that commitment in action. In the remainder of this section, I analyze the empirical features of the character to lead focusing on core insights highlighted above: normative commitments which reflect the self-importance leaders attach to being a combat leader and by extension the standards that define what it means to be a combat leader; two characteristic motivations that derive from the leader's normative commitments which I call the *obligation to duty* and *aspiration to honor*; volitional disciplines which refer to the self-control to realize one's commitments to duty and honor in the face of adversity.

### **Normative commitments.**

You've got to be committed—to the mission, to the platoon, and to your leadership.... We can't have people who don't want to be here. (Squad Leader)

To be a leader in combat is to be committed to uphold the normative standards of leadership. This commitment is viewed as the totality of internalized normative pressures to act in a way that upholds the standards of leadership. The character of the leader is defined in large part by depth of this commitment, which motivates the willingness to resist and overcome adversity and, even at great personal risk and sacrifice, uphold the normative standards of leadership. A leader's success in upholding leadership standards

under conditions of adversity, consistently over time, depends in large part on the depth of his underlying normative commitment. By definition, commitments are not something leaders fail to uphold or abandon lightly. SSG K refused to abandon his commitment to lead from the front despite great fear and risk to his life. This observation underscores the finding that the combat leader's character is defined in terms of his commitment to the normative standards of leadership. As the quote above suggests, to be a leader in combat "you've got to be committed—to the mission, to the platoon, to your leadership."

***Identity-conferring.*** In the analysis of the standards of leadership in the previous section, three quotes from three different leaders were provided to illustrate normative orientation embedded in these standards and how leaders enact them in the practice of leading. Each of the three examples reflected a similar normative commitment: to complete the mission, to take care of soldiers, and to lead from the front. This commitment reflects leaders' deeply held normative beliefs about what is expected of someone in a leadership role in combat. It involves a strong predisposition to conform one's conduct and performance as a leader to normative standards. This conformity, however, is not "blind conformity"—it is not conformity imposed by external authority or fear of punishment or promise of reward. It is something that leaders have to come to understand as important through their own experiences and reflections and have come to care about as a matter of conscience. This deeper reflective quality of the leaders' normative commitment is revealed in the third quote from the Squad Leader regarding his habit of walking point (re-illustrated below).

Do I like walking point everywhere? No. But do I think I have to do it? Yes, because I have to lead from the front. That's old school [non-commissioned

officer (NCO)] stuff ... but it's what being an NCO is all about. I had a platoon sergeant in Iraq; he would always walk point and that's just something that stuck with me. I'm always walking in front of my guys and they see it and I think it's important. But not only am I supposed to do those things. I have to do those things. Because if I don't do them, how can I expect my guys to do them? I don't expect my soldiers to do something that I wouldn't do. I wouldn't send my guys out there to do something I wouldn't. (Squad Leader)

The Squad Leader—SSG K—walks point and “do[es] those things” (such as low crawling up a hill under fire) not only because he is “supposed to do those things,” but because he feels he “ha[s] to do those things.” In this statement, SSG K distinguishes between what he must do as a matter of conformity with normative expectations, and what he must do as a matter of principle that he has internalized based on his experience and reflection. He refers to an experience with a platoon sergeant he had on a previous combat deployment in Iraq. This platoon sergeant “would always walk point” and this example was something that “stuck” with him. Leading from the front by walking point is “old school NCO stuff”—meaning it is part of the tradition and custom of accepted practice of combat leadership. Based on this experience, he came to understand walking point as “important” not only for his soldiers to see him leading from the front in this way, but more significantly, he came to understand it as important to “*what being an NCO is all about.*”

This reveals the deeper reflective quality of leaders' normative commitment to the standards of leadership. SSG K in this case has internalized this normative standard as important to his self-understanding of what it means to *be* a combat leader. The commitment is, in short, identity-conferring. It is embedded in the *deep structure* of fundamental values and beliefs that constitute his self-understanding of “what being an



NCO is all about.” To this end, it is notable that during this mission when SSG K walked point, the same mission that he low crawled up the hill under fire during an enemy ambush, SSG K *was* the “senior man.” There was no higher ranking leader, e.g., his platoon leader or platoon sergeant, ordering him to walk point or low crawl up the hill under fire. He thus did not take these and other actions because someone commanded him, nor out of fear of punishment if he did not take them, nor even in the hope of recognition if he did. He was motivated simply and profoundly by his own inner commitment to do what he understood to be the necessary and right thing to do.

***Caring about.*** The final observation about leaders’ commitment is that it is grounded in a more basic conscientious concern—a deep “caring about” the practice of leadership itself. The notion of *caring about* is based on the observation that leaders exhibit a conscientious concern about the moral quality of the leadership they practice beyond its *instrumental effectiveness* and that this concern constitutes a significant source of their commitment to uphold the normative standards of leadership. Indeed, leaders like SSG K and the others analyzed in these findings demonstrate a quite serious concern about the quality of leadership they practice. Consider, for example, the following quote from SSG K above in which he explains his practice of leading from the front.

I don’t think I’m by any means exceptional. It’s just that I give a [expletive], you know.... I just care. I don't think that's anything amazing. Me and a few other [leaders], we just care about what we do. (Squad Leader, SSG K)

In this quote, SSG K almost seems to downplay the significance of his leading from the front by saying that it is not “exceptional” or “anything amazing.” He simply states almost matter-of-factly, “It’s just that I give a [expletive]...I just care.” Yet, in

light of the way SSG K conducts himself in action, especially in combat as described in his earlier quotes, SSG K's sense of caring about what he does cannot be interpreted as a lackadaisical or half-hearted sentiment. On the contrary, given the risk he incurred to his life in low crawling up the hill under fire for example, this sense of care can only be interpreted as a deep and visceral kind of caring that constitutes a significant source of his motivation to uphold the standards of leadership.

This caring about the practice of leadership is central to the leader's identity-conferring commitment to uphold the standards of leadership. It is something that my informants frequently emphasized as illustrated by the quotes below.

Care about being an NCO, about your job, about what you're doing—your mission, your soldiers, and doing right by them. Be conscientious. Be committed to the Army. Don't just be here to pay off college. (Squad Leader)

Here's something that's not in the book: You have to care about what you're doing. You really need to care about what's going on. You need to care about the welfare of your soldiers. You need to care about doing the right thing. (Squad Leader)

A Squad Leader has got to have passion for what he does. Otherwise he won't do it right, with anything he does. He's got to love his soldiers. He's got to love his missions. He's got to know what to do for his mission, how to work each of his soldiers in a different way because no soldier is exactly the same.... They definitely have to really love what they do. If they don't, it will not drive them through their daily business. (Squad Leader)

As illustrated by the quotes above, this sense of caring is not limited to compassion or empathy or benevolence directed towards soldiers; it includes caring about “your soldiers and doing right by them,” caring “about the welfare of your soldiers,” even caring about soldiers to the point of having “to love his soldiers.” This caring extends beyond these conventional notions of benevolence. As reflected in the quotes above, it

involves a broader, more comprehensive, and conscientious concern with the practice of leadership itself: caring about “being an NCO, about your job, about what you’re doing—your mission” as well as caring about “your soldiers and doing right by them.” It involves a deeper level of commitment that extends beyond simply being “here to pay off college” and involves having “passion” and even “love” “for what [a combat leader] does.” It reflects the self-importance attached to the practice of leadership that is shared amongst infantry combat leaders.

This self-importance attached to the practice of leadership reflects a deep internalization of the normative standards of leadership. To be a leader of soldiers in combat is to understand, accept, and internalize these standards. The conscientious leaders, such as SSG K and the others analyzed in these findings, have developed a conscientious concern with moral quality of the leadership they practice, and through experience and reflection they have come to understand and accept the standards by which the quality of their leadership is judged to be good or bad. From this perspective, they are motivated to act consistent with the normative purposes and standards because it is right to do so, because it would be wrong practice to do otherwise.

The normative commitment to the standards of leadership is thus based on what leaders accept and internalize as their own self-imposed standards. Ultimately, standards accepted and internalized as one’s own based on experience and reflection tend to engage one’s motivation more deeply and reveal character more thoroughly than do those that are externally imposed. This point underscores the fact that normative commitment is a motivational phenomenon that manifests in the two characteristic motivations introduced

above—obligation to duty and aspiration to honor. These are the focus of the next two sections.

### **Obligation to duty.**

I'm only human and there've been times, especially when you're getting shot at, [when my soldiers] look to me for answers. Especially when you get that first bit of contact and it's just kind of like a wall that hits you in the face, like "Holy crap, I have to make a decision." I've seen that first initial impression when you're getting shot at, when you realize you have to make that decision and you have to make it quickly because people's lives are on the line. I think once you break through that, then it becomes easier. But like I said, it's kind of like a punch in the nose but once you have that first experience you realize that your decision can make or break everybody in your organization. That's what I found to be the hardest part of being a leader. (Platoon Leader)

Leadership in combat is a grave responsibility. Those entrusted with the responsibility literally hold the lives of their fellow soldiers in their hands. Leaders do not take this responsibility lightly; they shoulder and bear the burden with a certain gravitas that reflects the seriousness of the responsibility. This felt sense of personal responsibility is the essence of the obligation to duty and is illustrated by the Platoon Leader's quote above.

The Platoon Leader is a young 24-year old second lieutenant. At the time of my interview, he had been a Platoon Leader for just over three months. This was his first leadership position in the Army and his first combat deployment. In that short time, however, he and his platoon had been in several firefights and he had already been wounded twice (earning two purple hearts and he would earn a third while I was embedded with him). In this quote we glimpse his "initial impression" of the heavy responsibility he bears as a leader, specifically with regard to the importance of exercising good judgment.

An important part of leading in combat involves making decisions quickly under pressure. He acknowledges this responsibility and also recognizes that his decisions literally impact the lives of his soldiers: “Holy crap” those decisions “can make or break everybody in your organization”—“their lives are on the line.” And this fact has a stark impact on him: “It’s like a wall that hits you...kind of like a punch in the face.”

These are the words of a young officer confronting the grave responsibility of leadership in combat. Emergent here is a sense of personal responsibility that is not a matter of normative obligations externally imposed by force of authority; it reflects an understanding and conscientious concern with the responsibilities attached to his role as a leader. This is the essence of the obligation to duty. It involves an internalized normative orientation that predisposes the leader to *make himself responsible for fulfilling the duties and obligations attached to his role as a leader*. It is the moral force of this felt sense of personal responsibility that is the motivational foundation of the obligation to duty.

This felt sense of personal responsibility manifests in three distinct kinds of duty motives associated with the primary normative standards of leadership. By duty motives I refer to certain principled action patterns that leaders’ exhibit that reflect their sense of obligation to uphold the standards of leadership. First is the duty motive associated with *competence* in completing missions. Second is the duty motive associated with *loyalty* in taking care of soldiers. Third is the duty motive associated with *taking responsibility* for leading from the front. These duty motives are depicted in Figure 5.4 as first order categories. Below I elaborate the empirical features of these duty motives.

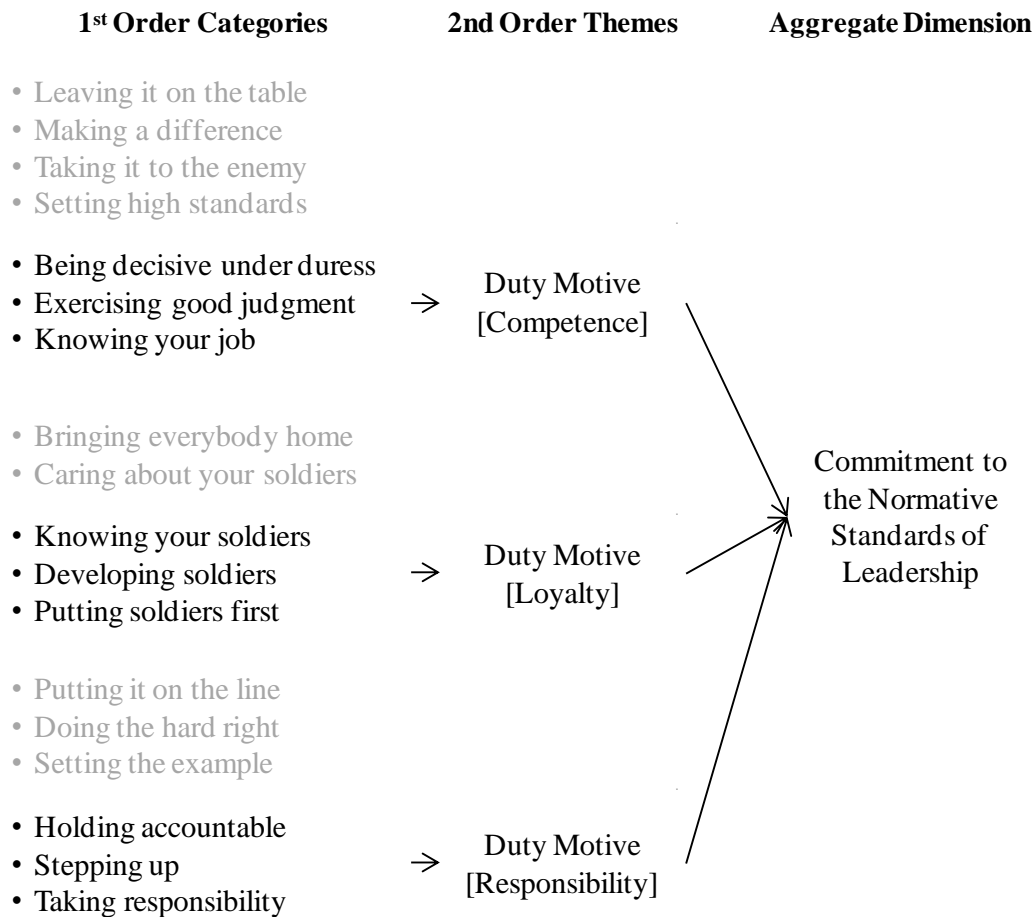


Figure 5.4. Duty motives associated with the normative standards of leadership.

***Duty motive of competence.*** In completing missions, the first duty leaders owe is competence—having the knowledge, skill, judgment, and strength to effectively complete missions. Leaders who are conscientious about their duty to complete missions feel a strong sense of responsibility to be competent. Associated with this urge to competence are three characteristic duty motives or principled action patterns: knowing your job, exercising good judgment, and being decisive under duress. These motives are depicted in Figure 5.4 above. I elaborate the empirical features of these duty motives below.

*Knowing your job.* In combat, knowing what you are doing—having the knowledge, skill, and ability to perform your job—is essential to completing the mission.

Leaders express a strong sense of duty to know their job as indicated by the following

Squad Leader quotes:

You really need to know your job. You have to have a good knowledge base—what’s got to be done and how. You have to be able to apply your knowledge and put it into action when the time comes. (Squad Leader)

You really need to know what you’re doing. You need to know your job inside and out. You need to know your responsibilities as a team leader, as a squad leader and also knowing your men, which would go along with caring too. So I would say... that knowing what the [expletive] you’re doing [is most important]. (Squad Leader)

It’s absolutely key that you are technically and tactically proficient. It’s also critical that you are physically capable—you have to be able to lead from the front, carry the load, and get the job done out here on this difficult terrain. (Squad Leader)

Knowing your job requires that leaders be tactically sound, technically proficient, and physically fit in order to be able to “get the job done.” In this respect, knowing what your job is a functional imperative. But it is more than just a functional imperative; it also carries moral status. In combat, the lives of the other soldiers are dependent on leaders being able to competently fulfill their responsibilities. As suggested above, failure to do so has consequences that go beyond failure to complete missions; it can get others hurt or killed. Thus competence is a moral imperative because incompetence kills—a lack of competence is a threat to the lives and welfare of the soldiers.

Your soldiers are relying on you to put them in a position where there is not going to be any unnecessary risks. So knowing your job is critical; it’s the leader’s responsibility to know how to do this stuff. (Squad Leader)

*Exercising good judgment.* In combat, a critical responsibility of leaders is to make decisions. Exercising good judgment in making decisions is where the rubber meets the road in terms of leader competence. One squad leader emphasized this point in describing how a failure to make a good decision cost him a seriously wounded team leader.

A wrong decision can take a toll. [One of our Soldiers] got badly wounded by an IED. The route we selected was bad. There were indicators that we should have chosen something different: the locals were acting strange; there was white smoke coming out of a house. These were not red flags; they were just things that made you wonder about what's going on. I didn't pay close enough attention to these signs and we lost one seriously wounded Team Leader. (Squad Leader)

Given the gravity of their decisions, leaders express a strong sense of obligation to exercise good judgment. Leaders emphasize the importance of being thoughtful, conscientious, and thinking decisions through and, in turn, being able to explain and justify those decisions to their soldiers in order to inspire confidence in their decisions.

Be conscientious and thoughtful: do well-thought-out, detailed planning. You owe that to your guys. (Squad Leader)

It's important that your decisions inspire confidence from your Joes. You need to be able to justify your decisions—to explain the “why” in common sense terms. This is the litmus test. (Squad Leader)

In combat, a key criterion for good judgment is that leaders never put soldiers unnecessarily at risk. Soldiers understand and accept risk as an inherent part of combat. The leader's responsibility is to avoid unnecessary risk. Leaders express a strong sense of obligation to make decisions that avoid unnecessary risk.

You have to exercise good judgment. You have to know your job, make good decisions, and not take any unnecessary risk that put your Soldiers lives in danger. (Squad Leader)



Your guys count on you to exercise good judgment: never put anyone in danger unnecessarily; keep it fair, think it through, and ask for help. (Squad Leader)

*Being decisive under duress.* Combat is an environment where decisions leaders make must frequently be made quickly, decisively, and under considerable duress. The importance of being decisive takes on special urgency during firefights. In combat, a leader's failure to decide and act decisively can be catastrophic for the mission and the lives of soldiers. The imperative to be decisive under the duress of combat is illustrated by the following quote from a Squad Leader.

I've seen [a Platoon Leader] [expletive] laying on his back in a firefight because he didn't know what the [expletive] to do.... And it's like, "What the [expletive] are you doing? You've got four guys in the riverbed pinned down with machine gun fire and you're laying here with no [communications]. What are you doing?" And he was just like, "Oh." What the [expletive] man! Make a decision, do something, because the [situation] is going bad right now. So I mean it's not to say he's a bad guy, but he just didn't have the experience. But when something like that happens, he doesn't need to be on the ground, he needs to [expletive] make a decision. And if he doesn't know how to make a decision, that's putting people's lives at risk. I don't like that [expletive]. I think that's ridiculous. (Squad Leader)

The need to make decisions under the duress of combat puts leaders in a challenging situation—between the proverbial rock and a hard place: indecisiveness can get people killed, but also decisive but poor judgment can similarly get people killed. The leader's only "out" in these situations is good judgment exercised decisively. This is a difficult standard to meet and not all leaders meet as illustrated by the Squad Leader's quote above.

In addition, leaders recognize the need to balance being thoughtful and deliberate with being timely and decisive.

Be thoughtful. You do not always have the time, but take as much time as situation allows and take as much into consideration as you can. Then go with it—make the best decision you can and correct it later. (Squad Leader)

Be confident. Stick to your decisions and see them through. If the guys don't think you know what you're doing, they won't follow you. (Squad Leader)

Ultimately, leaders recognize the need to err on the side of decisiveness, to make a decision—even a less-than-optimal decision—rather than fail to act from indecision.

When the situation requires a decision, make it. Whether you're right or wrong, you've got to decide and do something. If you're hesitant, it causes guys to question your judgment. (Squad Leader)

***Duty motive of loyalty.*** In taking care of soldiers, the primary duty leaders owe is loyalty to their soldiers' welfare—the willingness to be faithful to one's soldiers and put their interests ahead of one's own interests. Leaders who are conscientious about their duty of loyalty feel a strong sense of responsibility to take care of soldiers—an *urge to care*. Associated with this urge to care are three characteristic duty motives: *putting soldiers first*, *developing and training soldiers*, and *knowing and keeping tabs on soldiers*. These motives are depicted in Figure 5.4 above. I elaborate the empirical features of these duty motives below.

***Putting soldiers first.*** The foundational principle of the duty of loyalty is to *put soldiers first*. Putting soldiers first refers to a mindset that involves “selflessness”—of always thinking about soldiers and their needs before thinking about one's own needs.

Put Soldiers ahead of yourself. Selflessness – the last thing on your mind is yourself. You always have to be thinking about your soldiers and the team. (Team Leader)

You have to put your soldiers first. They're counting on you. When it comes down to it we are the ones that are supposed to train the Joes and make sure that

they have everything that they need and know what they need to know. That's our job. (Team Leader)

This notion of putting soldiers first manifests in a number of behaviors ranging from ensuring that soldiers are trained and equipped to complete missions, to addressing various pay and administrative issues that arise, to keeping tabs on the mental and physical health of soldiers. These responsibilities are understood to be the "job" of leaders—the reason "why they're out here."

That's their job; that's why they're out here—to take care of them and bring them all home. It can go from the smallest thing to the largest thing, but they should always keep those guys in the forefront of their minds. That's what they should be doing every day, checking on their guys and seeing what they can do to take care of them, whether it's getting assignments for them, checking on their leave, whatever. (Platoon Sergeant)

*Developing and training soldiers.* Small unit firefights are often won or lost in moments; whoever can bring the most combat power to bear first usually wins. This requires that leaders and soldiers at the lowest levels act intelligently and independently. Leaders thus recognize the duty to train and develop subordinate leaders and soldiers to meet the tactical demands of combat.

You have to develop your soldiers. For many, it's their first deployment and first combat; they're not used to it; you don't know how they'll react. You have to get them mentally ready – get their heads in the game. (Squad Leader)

Delegating responsibilities to soldiers coupled with developmental counseling is crucial for helping subordinates improve performance and prepare for additional responsibilities. Small unit leaders highlight the importance of ongoing and informal counseling of their soldiers.

You've got to delegate tasks to soldiers to develop their sense of responsibility. Allow them the freedom to push themselves. Give them opportunity to show they

can do things and expect the unexpected from them—never underestimate your guys. Trust that the training you give them will payoff. (Squad Leader)

Counseling along the way is critical. You've got to get your guys ready for the next level. We use verbal counseling, one-on-one, face-to-face, focusing on what they're doing good and what they need improvement on. (Squad Leader)

*Knowing and keeping tabs on soldiers.* Being away from home and engaged in continuous combat for 12 months takes a mental and physical toll on soldiers. Each soldier has his breaking point—physical and mental—when he becomes “combat ineffective.” Leaders recognize as part of their duty to take care of soldiers the responsibility to know their soldiers on a deep personal level. By this they mean “really knowing them”—the intimate details of their personal life, family, wife, girlfriends, etc. as well as their fears and anxieties stemming from the experience of combat. By knowing their soldiers on a deep personal level leaders are better able to “keep tabs” on their soldiers' mental and physical welfare and better able to respond when a soldier has a problem.

Leaders need to know their men. And when I say know their men I mean like, literally know them.... If you don't know your soldiers and what they're dealing with in their life, it's going to be hard to get those interpersonal skills on how to deal with each soldier. (Squad Leader)

Knowing your soldiers as a leader, as an NCO. I mean everyone's different. If you don't know your soldiers it's going to be a rough year. Everyone has their different breaking points and different ways to handle things and if you don't know how to deal with that and you're just a one type leader, you're just a direct leader or, you know, or a passive leader or whatever I think you're going to have a lot of issues in the long run. (Squad Leader)

You have to go around your AO and check on your soldiers—talking with them, getting face-to-face time with each Joe, seeing if they have any issues. You have to talk with them about what's going on, making sure they're getting their PT, hygiene, sleep, keeping up on their maintenance. You have to watch your guys

and make sure their not injured; they'll want to push through injuries. (Squad Leader)

***Duty motive of responsibility.*** As indicated above, leading from the front involves the commitment to share the hardship and danger of combat with soldiers and do so in a way that sets an example for them to follow. This requires that leaders first and foremost take responsibility for leading from the front. Three duty motives are associated with this sense of responsibility: *taking of responsibility* for leading your soldiers, *stepping up and taking ownership* for more than the formal limits of your role, and *holding yourself and other leaders accountable* for fulfilling your responsibilities. These motives are depicted in Figure 5.4 above. I elaborate the empirical features of these duty motives below.

***Taking responsibility.*** Conscientious leaders make themselves personally responsible for fulfilling the responsibilities associated with leadership. They take responsibility for leading and “do [their] job to the best of [their] ability.” This is the essence of what it means to take responsibility for your job. It involves conscientious attention to countless details, like: “following orders,” “supporting the chain of command,” “being on time for work details,” and “always doing the job right.”

Take responsibility for your portion of the mission, just do your job to best of your ability every time, don't give anything less than your best that's basically a hundred percent all the time is what you've got to do. (Platoon Leader)

Handle business like you're supposed to; take orders like you're supposed to; support the chain of command like you're supposed to; take responsibility like an NCO should. (Squad Leader)

As suggested by the quotes below, taking responsibility also has negative responsibilities associated with it: not having to be “babysat,” not letting your buddies

down by not taking care of your part of the pie, and most importantly, not shirking your responsibilities. Shirking responsibilities is a cardinal sin in combat units. Everyone is dependent on everyone else to pull their weight. Not pulling your weight, not taking care of your part of a mission, endangers others as well as risks the mission. Shirking or “playing hooky” gets a leader (or a soldier for that matter) in a “world of [expletive].” Leaders understand the importance of fulfilling their responsibilities. They therefore not only exhibit a strong negative compulsion to *not* shirk their responsibilities, but also exhibit a strong positive compulsion to go on missions, especially tough missions, even when they are hurt or not feeling well.

There’s no shirking. If everyone else is going through it, then they want to be there too. None one wants to miss out on a tough mission. If guys are hurt, then they get help but they don’t malinge. (Platoon Leader)

Don’t shirk your responsibilities. I mean obviously if you are hurt, get help, but don't malinge, don't try to ride something. We haven't had any issues because most of our guys understand that and they understand that we need every person that we can get for every mission. So if we find out that you are basically trying to play hooky, then yeah, you would be in a world of [expletive]. (Squad Leader)

*Stepping up and taking ownership.* Closely related to taking responsibility is the duty to step up and take ownership for more than the formal limits of your role and responsibilities. Leaders’ obligations extend beyond just what their formal roles proscribe. The chaos and complexity of combat makes leading in combat a team effort. Leaders recognize a responsibility to step up and provide leadership where and when required regardless of whether it falls within their formal role and responsibilities.

You need to step up when, you know, somebody's not there or something's going wrong or something happens when we're out there....It’s the idea of like stepping up, with being like, “This is my platoon, my squad, I want to get on the ground, I want to see what's going on and make stuff happen.” (Company First Sergeant)

In addition, stepping up and taking ownership demands that leaders be willing to exercise a significant amount of initiative. This involves being able to anticipate as opposed to just react to tasks and being able to complete them without requiring a lot of guidance.

Good NCOs the one's you have to rein in rather than push out. During a firefight it shows. When I tell them to move to uncovered position and lay down suppressive fire, it's "Roger SGT, we're already there"—that's when you know. (Platoon Sergeant)

You've got to take guidance and go with it and not require a lot of guidance. Know how to work within the intent and tasks and do it to the best of your ability. Think outside the box, figure it out and get it done. (Platoon Sergeant)

*Holding each other accountable.* Responsibility implies accountability. In fulfilling their responsibilities, leaders have significant discretion. Leaders hold each other accountable for how they exercise that discretion. Everyone is held accountable to the same standard(s) and leaders reinforce that standard amongst each other "always." Being "reckless" or "too lenient or lazy" will get a leader "tore up." If one leader starts to "slack off and not do the right thing," then the other leaders will hold him accountable and "pull him back in line." Leadership in this sense is a kind of trust and leaders are accountable to themselves and to each other for how they handle that trust. Accountability thus involves owning the actions one performs and standing ever-ready to give an account of the consequences of one's actions.

We hold leaders accountable to the same standard and we reinforce that standard always. You're held accountable for dropping the ball on something—waking up late for your guard shift; or on missions, not performing because of sleep, water, or something. Everyone wants to be treated like adults; everyone wants trust. You can have that, but it means that everyone has to hold themselves accountable. (Platoon Leader)

I hold [NCOs] accountable for everything: their actions, what their soldiers do and what they don't do. If one of my NCO's is being reckless with his Joes or he is just being too lenient or lazy, that's when they're going to get tore up. I have gotten rid of several NCO's because of this. (Platoon Sergeant)

If one of the guys in the platoon starts to slack off and not do the right thing then [the other leaders] will hold them accountable and they'll pull him back in line. (Platoon Sergeant)

**Summary.** In sum, leading in combat is a serious responsibility. The obligation to duty captures the importance leaders attach to fulfilling the responsibilities associated with their role as leader. It involves a distinct normative orientation that predisposes the leader to make himself personally responsible for fulfilling the duties and obligations attached to his role as a leader. It manifests in three distinct sets of duty motives: competence in completing missions, loyalty in taking care of soldiers and responsibility in leading from the front. The obligation to duty thus reflects leaders' internalization of the normative obligations associated with standards of leadership. It is the moral force of this felt sense of personal responsibility that is the motivational foundation of the strong normative commitment to uphold standards. But leadership in combat is more than a responsibility; it is also an achievement—it is something that is earned based on merit and proving yourself worthy of leading. This is the motivational focus of the aspiration to honor.

**Aspiration to honor.**

Respect. I feel I've earned it. I feel that my guys have the confidence and even before I got Sergeant they had the confidence in me that I could do my job and tell them to do what was needed to get back safe and I don't know walking around it feels like you... I don't know... you get a little more respect because you have the stripes I guess. It gives you a little bit more... it gives you confidence, plus in the time that I made it, it helped me realize you know, nailed down that I can do



my job and my leaders know it and they have the confidence in me or otherwise they wouldn't have sent me to the board. (Team Leader)

The quote above is from a young 22-year old sergeant who, like the lieutenant who introduced the obligation to duty, is also on his first combat deployment. This informant was promoted to the formal rank of sergeant and position of team leader during the deployment. Like the lieutenant, his quote reflects his emerging understanding of what it means to be a leader in combat. But in this quote, the sergeant emphasizes not the *responsibility* of being a leader, but the *achievement*. In reflecting on his promotion, he describes how he proved his worth as a leader. It reflects that he “made it,” that he proved he can do the job and that he earned the confidence and respect of his soldiers as well as his leaders. This is the heart of the aspiration to honor: the motivation to prove your worth as a leader in and through your performance, which in turn earns the respect of those who matter most in combat—your fellow “brothers in arms,” subordinates, peers, and superiors alike.

Honor as a motivation is largely archaic and difficult to understand. The most common understanding of honor is a measure of esteem and commendation, often a formal award for higher-than-usual achievement. To honor individuals or groups is to single them out on the grounds of merit. Less well understood but an older, more significant notion is that of honor as a compelling motive to take action (or refrain from certain actions) (Welsh, 2008). This notion of honor is grounded in the desire to prove one's worth and earn the respect of one's primary group.

This notion of honor as a motivation to prove your worth and earn respect as a leader is highly salient amongst leaders and soldiers in combat. As one Platoon Sergeant

stated, “When [leaders] first come to the platoon, their biggest challenge is just proving themselves.” This urgency to prove your worth as a leader is reflected in the comment below by a female Platoon Leader who faced the added burden of being a woman in the male-dominated environment of combat:

I mean I guess I can say that being a woman is a challenge. I’ll admit it because it’s pretty frustrating when you’re doing a mission with somebody and they’re like, “What?!” I’m like, “Yes, I’m a girl. I do route clearance. It’s okay. I can do it.” And I would say being a woman especially in a combat engineer unit people underestimate you off the bat. And I guess that kind of sounds stereotypical but I’ve seen it on more than one occasion. Pretty much I just prove that I know what I’m talking about I guess and sound as intelligent as possible when I’m talking to them—briefing, make sure that I, you know, communicate while we’re out there on the radio well, try and help out the unit that we’re supporting as best as I can and, you know, make sure nothing goes wrong I guess. (Platoon Leader)

Thus, whereas the obligation to duty emphasizes the responsibility associated with being a combat leader, the aspiration to honor emphasizes the respect associated with proving yourself to be worthy of being a combat leader. And, whereas the duty emphasizes a leader’s normative obligations—it reflects the compulsion to fulfill one’s responsibilities; honor emphasizes a leader’s normative aspirations—it reflects the motivation to achieve the status of a leader as reflected by the respect earned from soldiers and superiors alike.

The aspiration to honor manifests in three distinct sets of honor motives associated with the primary normative standards of leadership. First is honor motives associated with *taking pride* in completing missions. Second is honor motives associated with *loyalty* in taking care of soldiers. Third is the honor motives associated with *earning respect* by leading from the front. These honor motives are depicted in Figure 5.5 as first order categories. Below I elaborate the empirical features of these honor motives.

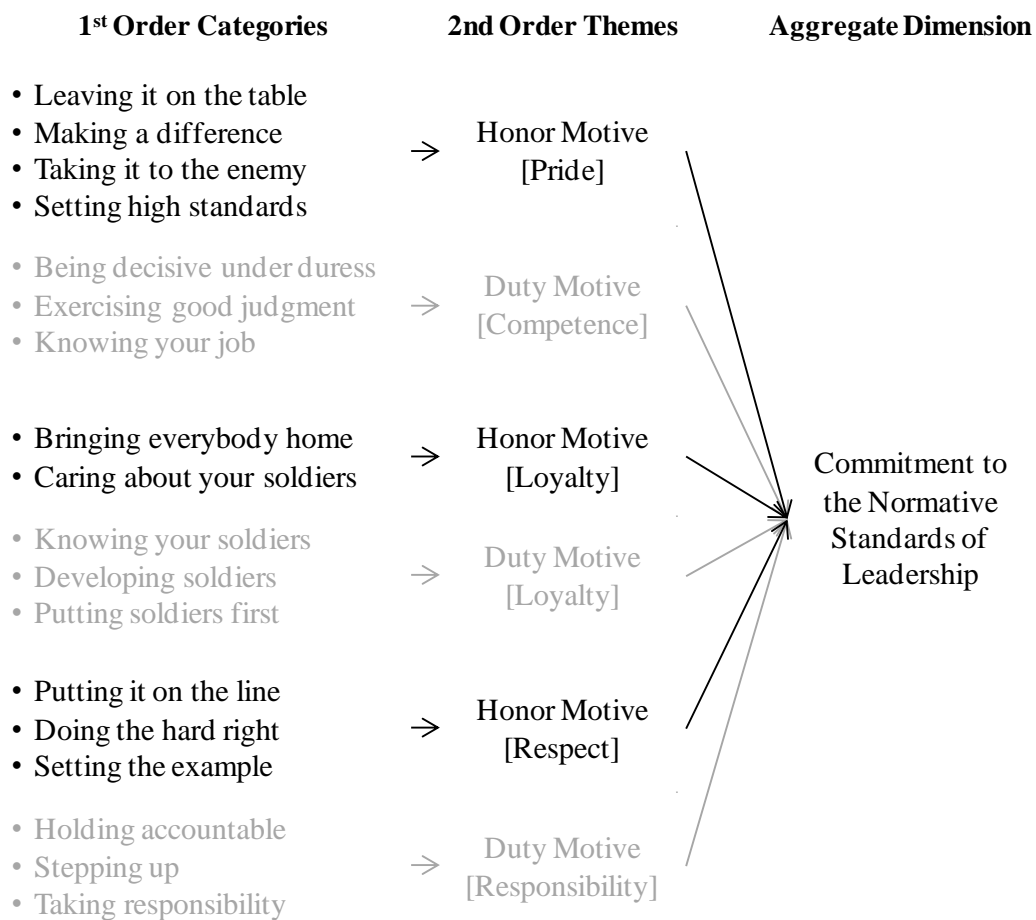


Figure 5.5. Honor motives associated with the normative standards of leadership.

***Honor motive of pride.***

We take pride in being the “go to” platoon. We walk farther, carry more weight than other platoons; we’re better physically conditioned, better tactically; we’re always on time and always squared away. We always get pulled to do the [tough] missions. It reflects the commander’s confidence in us. (Squad Leader)

Recall the earlier analysis of the primary normative standard of leadership to complete the mission. I illustrated this standard with a quote from a Platoon Leader who

stated emphatically that “not completing the mission is not an option” and that the mission will be completed “no matter what.” While these statements clearly express the strong obligation to complete the mission, they say nothing about going “above and beyond” merely completing the mission. The Squad Leader in the quote above, by contrast, does convey a sense of *obligation plus* or *going above and beyond* merely completing the mission. His quote emphasizes not the necessity to complete the mission, but the pride he and his platoon take in completing missions—in being “pulled to do the [tough] missions,” in being the “go to” platoon, in “walk[ing] farther,” “carry[ing] more weight,” being “better physically conditioned,” and “better tactically.” These comments reflect the aspiration to go “above and beyond” the obligation to complete the mission that characterizes the honor motive my informants frequently describe as “taking pride.”

My informants frequently emphasize “taking pride” in completing missions as central to their motivational orientation. This pride associated with completing missions extends beyond the normative obligations of duty and reflects a normative aspiration. As normative aspiration, taking pride reflects a commitment to high standards, a commitment to achieving mastery or excellence, and the sense of satisfaction in performing well and being recognized for it by the “commander’s confidence.” Associated with this honor motive of taking pride are four distinct motives: *setting high standards*, *taking it to the enemy*, *making a difference*, and *leaving it on the table*. These honor motives are depicted in Figure 4.5 above as first order categories. I briefly describe each of these below.

*Setting high standards.* The motive of pride associated with completing the mission involves setting and achieving high standards that go beyond the normative obligations of duty. It manifests from an agonistic spirit—a competitive desire to “be the best.” This competitive spirit involves re-valuing the experience of combat from something bad to be endured and survived to something, if not good, at least a challenge to be mastered; from simply getting through combat to excelling in it. Below are some illustrative quotes.

We try to be the best at everything. It’s professionally our job. We don’t brag about what we do to anyone else; we keep everything in house. It’s something that I’ve preached to them from the very beginning: we don’t judge ourselves off of anyone else. I don’t care what any other platoon, company or battalion is doing in the brigade. I care about what we are and what standards we have and that’s something that the NCO’s in the platoon have accepted and hold their guys to. (Platoon Sergeant)

We hold our guys to a higher standard and they hold themselves to a higher standard because they know that we’re one of the better platoons in the troop and we like that. We like being called upon because we’re one of the better platoons. It just makes you work harder and drive harder. The same with your guys they see that and they want to continue that. (Team Leader)

We do things right and do things right the first time. We make the standard a little higher than it should be. We stay up on basics. We take pride in completing missions; doing something we know is difficult; first to take contact, first to take really long patrol. We got bragging rights in the company. (Squad Leader)

*Taking it to the enemy.* The second characteristic motive associated with taking pride in completing missions is an active and aggressive stance towards the enemy. The Squad Leader in the quote below reflects this attitude I label *taking it to the enemy*.

You’ve got to be aggressive and take it to the enemy. I’m not saying there aren’t situations that require patience—situations that you have to let develop. That’s part of it. But too many NCOs say, “I don’t care if I don’t go out again. I’m just waiting to go home.” That attitude [makes me angry]. You have to have the attitude: “How can we take it to the enemy?” You have to have the attitude that

you'll never miss an opportunity to kill the enemy. If you're going to get anything done out here, then you have to assume the risk. It's the only way an NCO can make a difference. But you have to want to get out there and get after the enemy. (Squad Leader)

This quote not only expresses commitment to the mission, but a commitment to getting after the enemy and never missing a chance to kill the enemy. The Squad Leader contrasts his aggressive attitude with leaders who have an indifference or apathy with regard to going on mission. The Squad Leader expresses a strong condemnation of this apathy, which fails to meet the obligations of duty let alone the aspirations of pride. The Squad Leader insists on an aggressive stance towards completing missions that goes beyond obligation in which the appropriate motivation is not "I don't care if I don't go out [on mission] again" but the more aspirational "How can we take it to the enemy?"

Leaders in "go to" platoons were not standoffish about assuming the risk entailed in taking it to the enemy. Their belief is that the only way a small unit can make a difference is if they "assume the risk" inherent in combat. What that means is that a leader cannot be overly focused on safety and minimizing risk. Leaders have to be willing to "assume the risk" if they are "going to get anything done." This conveys a sense of *obligation plus*—of going above and beyond merely completing the mission to *making a difference*.

*Making a difference.* Setting high standards and taking it to the enemy culminates in a third motive associated with pride in completing missions—*making a difference*. Leaders of "go to" platoons aspire to not just accomplish the technical requirements of missions, they aspire to make a difference and have an impact. This motivation is not so broad and lofty as to try to win the war. It is more circumspect than that. They recognize

that the “big picture stuff” is beyond their control. But nonetheless, within their sphere of influence, they seek to accomplish something—to achieve some sort of positive impact from their efforts.

What’s important is that we make a difference somehow: we saved somebody, stopped an ambush, got the [Afghan National Army] to start doing their job, the Afghan people trust us, making our [Area of Operations] a little better than when we got here. (Squad Leader)

What counts is making a difference. We completely changed the fight. We made the enemy change up their [tactics] by the way we were operating here. We caused the enemy to back up on their heels and reassess how they were operating. And at the same time, you know, we allowed the company some freedom to maneuver, some insight on what the enemy was doing, kind of like giving them the intelligence, you know, to engage the people or something like that. (Squad Leader)

This commitment to making a difference and having an impact goes beyond just succeeding on standard “measures of effectiveness.” It is not about improving the statistical measures of success that higher-level commanders seem to pay attention to, e.g., the amount of dollars spent on development projects, the number of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) found, etc. Leaders with whom I was embedded do not have much confidence in these quantitative measures of effectiveness. Some compare them to the focus on “body counts” in Vietnam. What they do focus on is achieving real, substantive impact in their area of operations.

There's a big joke with me and the other platoons because after a mission when we got blown up, I was really upset and I was like, “I don't care about finding IED's.” And I thought about that, and I even talked to the commander about it too. And in a sense it's true. Getting [IED] finds or, you know, strikes I don't really think measures how successful the platoon is. I think that making an impact on the area that we're maneuvering in and also making an impact on the units that we're working for is a better measure of success in my book. My guys really appreciate it when, you know, units request my platoon specifically and they trust you and they know you're going to do a good job. And I think that

makes us successful. Also when we're out there, you know, if you can impact one person or a village in some way I think that's a better measure of success than, you know, finding an IED or, you know, getting hit by one. (Platoon Leader)

*Leaving it on the table.* Setting high standards, taking it to the enemy, and making a difference manifests in a justified sense of satisfaction in performance—of being proud of one's efforts and accomplishments. Ultimately, leaders are motivated by a desire to be proud, to have a genuine sense of merit and satisfaction that they faced the challenge of combat, gave their best effort, and made a difference. This is what is meant by *leaving it on the table*.

Everybody is satisfied with our performance and what we did here. What I mean by that is, "Hey, leave it all on the table." Give 110 percent while we're here and doing our missions and then, when it's time to leave and everybody is back home drinking beers, they can be satisfied with what they did. (Squad leader)

Just knowing that anytime battalion gave us a mission we fulfilled the end state and there wasn't a mountain there wasn't a battle space that we couldn't handle. We can't always guarantee that the enemy is going to want to show up and let us shoot at him, so I think by being able to go to any battle space in our battalion's area and being able to take it on, I think that's our measure of success. (Squad Leader)

Leaving it on the table requires a commitment to hard work over taking it easy; prioritizing getting "out there," doing "our job," and fighting the enemy over "sit[ting] in our cushy tents," enjoying the air conditioning and "playing our video games."

Basically we will take the mission that nobody wants we will take the duties that nobody wants because we're here to work. We're not here to sit in our cushy tents with what little air conditioning we have and play our video games. We realize we're here to fight the enemy and any chance that we can get, whether it's in our favor or not, we'll get out there and do our job. The consensus is the other platoons might whine and complain but we don't and I think that earns us a lot of kudos from command. (Squad Leader)



***Honor motive of loyalty.***

The reason that I'm here is because these guys are here. And if they're going to be here then they need to have someone here that is able to think about what we're doing and lead them and keep them as safe as we can.... the fact that they're doing something more important than, you know, 99 percent of what society's doing, and doing it at such a young age. Like if these kids are over here, then I've got to be over here with them. That's just how it is. (Company Fire Support Officer)

Loyalty is both a motive associated with duty and honor. As a motive associated with duty, it concerns the obligations one has to other members of one's group or community. The duty motive of loyalty was analyzed in the previous section addressing the duty to take care of soldiers. The leader's duty of loyalty derives from the obligations inherent in his job or role or position as a leader and his felt sense of responsibility to take care of soldiers.

By contrast, the Company Fire Support Officer (FSO) quoted above expresses a similar loyalty to take care of soldiers, but the emphasis is not on duties attached to his job or position as a leader. Rather, his loyalty is motivated by a strong emotional attachment to his soldiers grounded in a deep understanding, appreciation, and respect for them. The FSO recognizes that they are "doing something more important than...99 percent of society" and "doing it at such a young age." The statement conveys an admiration and respect for these soldiers; and it is this high regard for them that motivates his commitment to "lead them and keep them... safe." This reflects an aspirational quality of loyalty associated with honor.

This honor motive of loyalty is based on a leader's high regard and esteem he feels for his soldiers rather than the duties attached to his role and position as leader.

This sense of loyalty reflects a kind of aspiration associated with honor in that it goes beyond the obligations of duty. It reflects a strong personal attachment and devotion to soldiers—a kind of strong filial bond characteristic of a “band of brothers”—and it is this bond rather than his “job” that motivates him to be there with his soldiers, “to lead them,” and “keep them safe.” In short, whereas the duty of loyalty derives from a leader’s position and responsibilities attached to it, the honor of loyalty derives from a leader’s high regard and devotion to his soldiers. In the extreme case, which is not uncommon for soldiers in combat, this personal attachment is described as love—a strong paternalistic, familial kind of social bond.

I've said this and hopefully this don't go in the books but if it was between my guys and my wife then she'd be packing her bags right now. And she understands that actually. I mean those are my guys. I love them. (Platoon Sergeant)

Two characteristic motivations are associated with this honor motive of loyalty to take care of soldiers: *caring about soldiers* and *bringing everybody home*. These honor motives are depicted in Figure 5.5 above as first order categories. I briefly describe these below.

*Caring about your soldiers.* By definition, leaders who have a strong personal attachment to their soldiers care about them. Caring about your soldiers from this perspective involves “having compassion” and having a sense of empathy for their soldiers that is genuine and heartfelt—“really caring about what’s happening to them.” This compassion is not a matter of “babying” or coddling them, but a respect for the fact that they are “out here getting shot at and getting blown up” and recognizing the fact that this “is going to take a toll somewhere.”

Having compassion for your soldiers, actually really caring about what's happening to them. Like if they're having pay issues or they're having family problems—everybody kind of gets wrapped up in their own little world out here, you know, in their own heads. But you've got to actually care about what's going on with your guys, that's a big thing. You don't have to like baby them, but you're out here getting shot at and getting blown up and eventually it's going to take a toll somewhere. Or, if guys aren't getting paid because that's another problem. You've got to be the guy to step in and like, “Hey, I'll take care of that.” (Squad Leader)

This genuine, heartfelt “really” caring about their soldiers motivates leaders to take special interest and invest themselves more deeply in their soldiers’ personal welfare than they would otherwise. Leaders who really care about their soldiers in this way take a personal interest in “what’s going on” with their soldiers. They understand their soldiers’ “difficulties, their needs, and their wants.” They “care enough to solve problems” for their soldiers—pay issues, family problems, etc. In addition, leaders who care for their soldiers in this way never turn their soldiers away. On the contrary, they go out of their way to make themselves approachable for their soldiers so that they feel like they can “talk to [them] about things.”

Number one is a NCO that cares for his guys. He understands their difficulties, their needs, their wants. He actually cares enough to solve the problem [and] to make that part of that [soldier’s] life much better.... I want my guys to be able to come up to me and be able to talk to me about things. I want them to understand that I am here for them and I will do whatever I can to help them out. If I don’t have the answer I will go to another team leader and find out if they have the answer and if not I will go to the platoon sergeant and he will definitely find out. (Team Leader)

I think another one, as far as being on deployment for sure, is being approachable because [deployment is] a long time and you can’t go 12 months without having issues or family problems or just sometimes dudes feel bad for no [expletive] reason or whatever. You’ve got to be approachable and if your guys are having issues they’ve got to be able to talk to you and feel like you care enough to where if they are having these problems they can come to you at any time. I think that helps out with a lot of the stress issues. (Squad Leader)

*Bringing everybody home.* The loyalty to take care of soldiers culminates in a deeply felt commitment to “bring everybody home.” Making sure that they get their guys safely through combat and home “in one piece with all their digits attached”—is the main concern for small unit leaders and the desired “end state” of taking care of soldiers that receives a priority of their leadership attention. Small unit leaders admit that “bringing everybody home” sounds cliché. Nonetheless many leaders talked about it as a solemn responsibility they feel to their soldiers and their families.

Getting all my soldiers home is most important. I have two guys in [Forward Operating Base] Shank for [Traumatic Brain Injury] and one of my guys is at Walter Reed. I’ve not been 100 percent successful; I take it personally. (Platoon Sergeant)

Getting all my soldiers home safe and alive definitely is number one. Regardless of what we do or accomplish in this country, I would say my soldiers come first. I mean there are people out here trying to kill us. So for me, getting everybody home alive is definitely most important. (Squad Leader)

However, leaders realize that being an infantry soldier is dangerous business and that “shit happens.” They also realize that the “enemy has a vote.” In short, there is much that they cannot control that may cause one of their soldiers to not make it home. Nevertheless, small unit leaders reveal a genuine, heartfelt commitment to do everything they possibly can to bring their guys home—alive. This involves performing their responsibilities as leaders in such a way as to give their soldiers the best chance to “succeed on missions” and “make it back alive.”

What’s most important is that I did everything right: I gave my guys the best chance to succeed on mission and the best chance to make it back alive. (Squad Leader)

If I can go home and say that my actions—or my leader’s actions or my subordinates’ actions—no actions within my control were missed or caused the loss of a soldier, then I would think that we were successful. The mission is going to get completed one way or another. But if we all come home and we’re all healthy and it’s because of things that we did right, then I think that’s success. (Platoon Sergeant)

***Honor motive of respect.***

[Leaders] need to be that guy that everybody looks up to. You can be the guy with... all those cool badges and everything, and it doesn’t really mean anything. But if you’re that guy... that your soldiers look at and go “Wow, you know, one day I’m going to be him”.... If they look at their leader like that then they’re definitely a successful leader. And that’s because of the daily actions that they do. They’ve got to be able to lead by example, from the front, be able to take any hit that can be thrown at them, stand up for their soldiers when it’s needed. And that will earn the respect of their soldiers....And when I see that in my soldiers with their leaders, I think it’s just amazing. (Platoon Sergeant)

As stated above, leading in combat is not about leading from the *top*, it is about leading from the *front*. The duty motives associated with leading from the front focus on a leader’s responsibilities—taking responsibility, stepping up and taking ownership, and holding each other accountable. The focal concept here is responsibility—making oneself personally responsible for fulfilling the normative obligations associated with leading in combat. By contrast, the honor motives associated with leading from the front shift the motivational focus from *taking responsibility* to *earning respect*. This involves more than taking responsibility and sharing hardships and dangers with soldiers; it involves setting an example of martial virtue and excellence for soldiers that they admire, respect, and look up to, causing them to think, as the Platoon Sergeant stated in the quote above, “Wow, you know, one day I’m going to be him.”

In the Platoon Sergeant’s quote, he emphasizes the importance of leaders being “that guy that everybody looks up to.” The critical virtue emphasized is respect—a

leader is somebody who is worthy of respect. Being a leader that soldiers look up to does not depend on rank or having “cool badges” that soldiers earn in the Army, e.g., Ranger Tab, Airborne badge, etc. Leaders earn respect in and through their performance – in “the daily actions that they do” that demonstrate the qualities that soldiers expect and respect in leaders.

The Platoon Sergeant highlights some of these qualities: leaders “got to be able to lead by example, from the front, be able to take any hit that can be thrown at them, stand up for their soldiers when it’s needed.” This is not by any means an exhaustive list of qualities that earn a leader respect. But they are reflective of the normative understandings that underscore the importance of conducting oneself in a way that earns respect as a necessary condition to being a leader in combat. When leaders exhibit these qualities then they will earn the respect of their soldiers; they will be “that guy that everybody looks up to,” and this—more than position, rank, or “cool badges”—is what makes them a leader. Three of the key motives associated with leading from the front and earning respect include *setting the example*, *doing the hard right*, and *putting it on the line*. These honor motives are depicted in Figure 5.5 above as first order categories. I briefly describe these behaviors below.

*Setting the example.* In combat, leaders are judged foremost by the examples they set. If a leader is going to earn respect and have any credibility as a leader, then he must demonstrate through his performance and conduct that he possesses the virtues that soldiers admire and respect in leaders. This principle is so intuitively obvious that it does not require much elaboration, except to highlight some of the characteristic ways leaders

set the example for their soldiers. The quotes below illustrate some of these behaviors and the attitudes associated with them.

You have to set the example. If [Squad Leaders] expect their soldiers, their team leaders to execute something, they have to either have done it themselves or just show their team leaders or the soldiers that they can do it. (Platoon Sergeant)

Lead by example. If I'm telling guys to walk up a mountain that's 8,500 feet, I'm going to be the first one at the top of that hill. If my guys are getting two hours of sleep a night, I'm only getting an hour and a half, just so that the guys see that their leader's doing that, "The leader is actually doing more than me. I'm going to keep pushing." (Platoon Leader)

In these quotes we see the leader's concern for not asking soldiers to do something they won't or can't and being able to do *better* than whatever they ask soldiers to do, not only sharing in hardship and danger with their soldiers, but bearing *more* of it than they do. The underlying theme in setting the example is being somebody that soldiers look up to, that they want to follow, "not because they have to..." but as the Platoon Leader below emphasizes, "...because they want to." This motivation again highlights the point that combat leaders do not depend on their formal rank or position to lead; they earn their status as leaders by proving their merit and worth as leaders, which in turn motivates soldiers to "want" to follow them.

Physical fitness, being in the gym. Do you notice that the squad leaders and team leaders that work out, their soldiers automatically don't have to be told, but they're going to be working out? I think that's huge.... Just basically being somebody that the soldiers look at and they can be like, "Hey, I'm following that dude." Not because they have to follow them but because they want to. (Platoon Leader)

*Doing the hard right.* A key way leaders set an example for soldiers is by "doing the hard right over the easy wrong." In any given situation a leader faces, he has a choice to make. This choice is fundamentally different than say, the choice a person typically

makes at a restaurant from a menu: “Should I have chicken or pasta?” Presumably, a person desires both; choice simply involves deciding which he or she prefers more. In combat, choice is fundamentally different and more complex. Instead of a choice between two preferences, it involves choice between what leaders describe as the “hard right” (upholding normative standards) and the “easy wrong” (giving in to weakness, impulse or temptation). Conscientious leaders demonstrate a concern and commitment with doing “the hard right over the easy wrong.”

It’s probably one of the hardest things but you have to always try to take that hard right over the easy wrong. I mean it’s like one of those things you’d read straight out of the old school manual on leadership. But it’s true because that’s what a leader has to do. (Squad Leader)

Doing the hard right has strong overtones of the “must” of duty. However, leaders tend to associate doing the hard right with their personal integrity—of not doing anything that would mar, tarnish, or otherwise earn them disrespect or dishonor. Inherent in this sense of integrity is the necessity of courage, both moral and physical. It is this linkage to personal integrity and courage that makes *doing the hard right* a motive associated with honor.

I don't know what you would call it, whether you call it integrity or whatnot. But you know, looking at a situation and doing what's right by your guys and by what you think no matter what. (Team Leader)

Do what’s right no matter what. It’s about your integrity. Your guys might be getting screwed on something by the First Sergeant, it’s having the courage to stand up for them and do what's right for your guys. Or on patrol, doing what's right even though you're sitting out there for [expletive] two days in the middle of the hot sun and you haven't seen nothing; getting up there and pulling guard with your guys instead of just sitting back and sitting on the radio. I think stuff like that is huge. Doing what you know is right by your guys and by yourself. (Squad Leader)



As suggested by the quotes above, doing the hard right requires leaders to stand up for their soldiers on principle and “do right by them” when, for example, they are “getting screwed on something” or “pulling guard with your guys” on mission “instead of just sitting back and sitting on the radio.” The integrity and courage involved in doing the hard right in both difficult and routine situations reflects the characteristic motivation of earning (and maintaining) respect associated with the honor to lead.

*Putting it on the line.* In combat, leading from the front by setting the example and doing the hard right always involves the possibility of ultimate sacrifice of one’s life. To fully prove their worth as leaders and earn the respect of their soldiers, leaders must be willing to risk and even sacrifice their life. This willingness to sacrifice is what *putting it on the line* refers to. The quotes below highlight the importance of putting it on the line.

You’ve got to be personally engaged, active, and aggressive. When you’re in a firefight, you don’t tell your guys to move over there. You get up, move to them and say, “Pick your [gear] up and follow me! We’re moving over there.” You have to show them; you can’t just tell them. You have to lead them. When you’re up and moving, it inspires confidence. Your guys need to see you out there, exposing yourself, putting it on the line. (Squad Leader)

You’ve got to be willing to put yourself in those bad spots, you know. Because a lot of these guys, it’s their first deployment. They don’t know what it’s like; they’re not used to that kind of intensity of like having PKMs and RPGs shot at them and RPG rounds whizzing by their head and blowing up 10 feet behind them. You know you’ve got to be the guy to be like, “Let’s go, let’s get the fuck up and move.” You know that’s just the way it is; there is no other way to be. (Squad Leader)

**Summary.** In sum, the obligation to duty and aspiration to honor constitute the deep motivational structure associated with leaders’ normative commitment to the standards of leadership. Duty as a characteristic motivation is about what a leader *owes*;

it reflects the self-importance leaders attach to fulfilling their responsibilities. It manifests in duty-based motives associated with competence in completing missions, loyalty in taking care of soldiers and taking responsibility for leading from the front. The obligation to duty thus reflects leaders' internalization of the normative obligations associated with the standards of leadership.

By contrast, honor as a characteristic motivation is about what a leader *earns*; it reflects the self-importance leaders attach to proving themselves worthy as leaders in and through their performance, which in turn earns the respect of those who matter most in combat—their fellow “brothers in arms,” subordinates, peers, and superiors alike. It emphasizes honor-based motives associated with pride in completing missions, loyalty grounded in strong personal attachments to soldiers and respect earned by leading from the front. The aspiration to honor thus reflects the internalization of normative aspirations associated with the standards of leadership.

These two characteristic motivations—duty and honor—constitute the deep motivational structure of the leader character in combat. However, in combat, leaders' commitment to duty and honor are besieged by adversity. As described above, combat is an environment characterized by permanent and pervasive adversity: by the acute fear from an enemy attack and the chronic anxiety of persistent risk and danger; by the intense physical and mental strain of a difficult mission, the persistent stress of a high operational tempo, and the monotony of routine and tedious tasks; by the hardship of an austere environment and the loneliness separation from home, family, and friends. In both its traumatic and more tedious manifestations, adversity has a cumulative and corrosive

effect on morale and motivation. Under these conditions, a leader's commitment to duty and honor may fail to be satisfactorily realized in action unless reinforced. This brings us to the third dimension of leader character in combat: volitional disciplines.

**Volitional disciplines.** Leading in combat requires that leaders not yield or give in to adversity, but remain firm and continue to function in and through it. This requires what I call volitional discipline. Volitional discipline refers to acquired habits of self-control that enable a leader to persist and prevail in fulfilling the obligations of duty and the aspirations of honor in the face of temptation, obstacles, and challenges. It involves purposeful striving and effortful control to make one's commitments to duty and honor effective in action in and through adversity. Colloquially, it is associated with *strength of will* or *willpower*, both expressions suggesting a continuum with *weakness of will* or *lack of willpower* as its opposite. Inherent in this concept of volitional discipline is the leader's volitional struggle (introduced above) to exercise the self-discipline to do the "hard right" in upholding standards and avoid the "easy wrong" by yielding to fear, fatigue, frustration in the face of countervailing obstacles, temptations, and other forms adversity. Volitional discipline therefore, as I use the term here, refers to a strong form of self-control that enables leaders to bridge the gap between their normative commitments to duty and honor and their ability to realize those commitments in action, with some degree of reliable success, in the face of countervailing adversity.

The data suggest two broad dimensions of volitional discipline: moral and practical. Figure 5.6 below graphically depicts the structure of the data associated with the discipline to lead. Moral discipline is an intentional attitude or stance towards

traumatic adversity of combat that involves a volitional habit of making best efforts to fulfill the obligations of duty and aspirations to honor. While at the same time, it involves understanding that these efforts may be unavailing, but yet not allowing feelings and frustrations to get out of hand when facing the trauma of combat. Practical discipline emphasizes the countless little habits soldiers perform day-in-and-day-out that enable them to stay mentally and physically healthy and properly rested and focused to sustain a high level of performance in and through the persistent tedium of combat. Below, I address the first order empirical categories associated with these two dimensions of discipline.

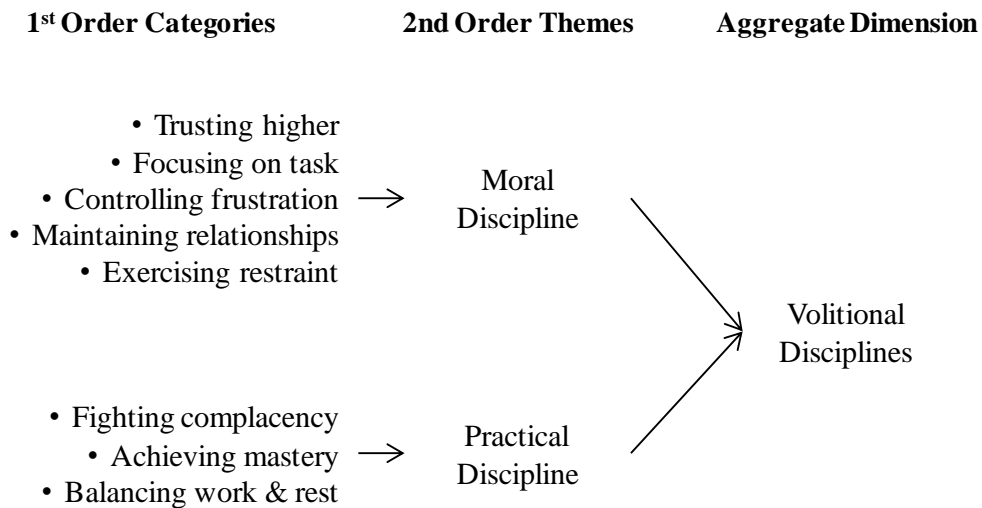


Figure 5.6. The volitional disciplines to overcome the adversity of combat.

**Moral discipline.** Dealing with the trauma of combat is one of the most difficult challenges leaders face. A crucial aspect of this is dealing with what my informants describe as the “fundamental disconnect.” The fundamental disconnect refers to a deep

tension associated with risking your life and “seeing your buddies get hurt” but “not seeing the effects of your efforts” in terms of tangible progress or results in the “battlespace.” It is one thing to risk your life and lose close friends for the mission; it is quite another to do so without benefit of seeing positive effects of your efforts. Leaders deal with this problem by cultivating what I call *moral discipline*. Moral discipline is an attitude or stance towards this tension that involves a volitional habit of making best efforts to fulfill the obligations of duty, while at the same time, understanding that these efforts may be unavailing. It involves the conscious and effortful exercise of self-control to not allow feelings to get out of hand when faced the reality of having to continually risk your life and suffer the loss of close friends and soldiers you love. Key first-order categories associated with moral discipline include: *trusting the big picture to higher command, focusing on the task at hand, controlling frustrations and maintaining a positive bearing, maintaining positive working relationships, and exercising tactical restraint*. I analyze each of these categories below.

*Trusting the big picture to higher command.* Despite the ambiguity surrounding the missions, small unit leaders have to simply resolve to trust the big picture to higher level chain of command. A Platoon Sergeant quoted previously alluded to this when he described the difficulty of backing higher decisions to conduct certain missions when he does not understand or cannot explain them himself. But regardless, he understands that he must back these decisions; as difficult as it may be, he must simply trust those decisions to the higher-level commanders who are responsible for them. One Squad Leader described this discipline to trust this way:

You have to trust higher. As a Squad Leader, you're not going to get all the info about what's going on. You have to hope that the people making the decisions know what they're doing, no matter how ridiculous the missions seems—we have to trust and keep getting the job done. (Squad Leader)

This trust is less an act of faith than it is an act of will—an exercise of a conscious choice and effortful self-control to not doubt, question, or allow himself or his soldiers to become so demoralized that they are unable to “keep getting the job done,” which in the end, is what they must do “no matter how ridiculous the missions seems.”

*Focusing on the task at hand.* Complementing trusting the big picture to higher is maintaining focus on the task at hand. Leaders compensate for the inability to see the effects of COIN at the tactical level by focusing on goals that are “closer to home” that they have more direct influence over. Focusing attention and effort in this way helps provide maintain a sense of purpose and direction and sense of control in the face of circumstances that otherwise seem futile or hopeless. One Squad Leader described this refocusing this way:

The big picture stuff does not involve us...because the big picture stuff is going to take care of itself. So it's not that I don't care; I just know that I have no control over all that stuff. I don't have control over the district sub-governor talking to these [villagers]. I don't have control over each one of these villages finding a representative and all these representatives having a vote in what happens in [this] district. I don't have control over that, I never will, and I know that. What I do have control over is my squad—making sure my soldiers are squared away, making sure I'm squared away, making sure we all come back alive, and that's all that matters. (Squad Leader)

In this quote, the Squad Leader acknowledges that he has no control over the “big picture stuff.” The big picture “is going to take care of itself.” On the other hand, what he does have control over is his squad—“making sure [his] soldiers are squared away,

making sure [he's] squared away," and most importantly, "making sure we all come back alive."

The two Squad Leaders quoted below emphasize a similar disciplined focus on the task at hand. They acknowledge that it is difficult: It is difficult to stay focused "when it's 110 degrees and you're baking out in the sun" and they "don't have a real mission." Soldiers are tempted to become distracted, to question "Why the [expletive] am I out here?" But Squad Leaders emphasize that this is precisely why you must discipline yourself to stay focused on the task at hand, on "what your task is that day" and "on what you're doing."

It's tough [not having a clear mission] so you've just got to stay focused on what your task is that day. "My task is to do this," so you've got to stay focused on that, and it's hard when it's 110 degrees and you're baking out in the sun and you're like, "Why the [expletive] am I out here?" You've got to stay focused on what you're doing. (Squad Leader)

I guess staying focused, staying motivated... just staying focused on the task at hand. I think the reason for that is because we don't have a real [mission]—nobody really knows, like I said before, what the goal, the objective, the purpose is. So it's hard to stay focused on what you're doing and why you're doing it. I know that it's hard for them because we go out on all these missions, we go and do all of this stuff, but I guess you don't really know why a lot of the times, and we try to explain that to him and tell them what we're doing and why we're doing it, but it's hard when sometimes we don't know. (Squad Leader)

*Controlling frustration and maintaining positive bearing.* A third dimension of moral discipline is controlling frustration and maintaining military bearing. Leaders understand that everyone gets frustrated, that it is an inevitable part of the job. As one squad leader put it, "When it comes to that frustration, everyone will get frustrated at one point or another. It's just bound to happen. It's just part of the job." Yet, leaders also recognize the importance of not letting these frustrations get the better of them. They

emphasize the necessity of controlling emotions and maintaining a professional bearing, because to not do so, to lose control of emotions and bearing only aggravates the frustration everyone else feels. One Squad Leader described the necessity of controlling frustration and maintaining professional bearing this way:

I think probably the most difficult part is remembering not to wear your emotions on your sleeve. Like, even when you know the mission's stupid or it's going to suck or you've been getting run ragged for the last weeks or something. Always portraying that professional image to your soldiers, not letting them see you, fucking, you know, not letting them see you act like a Joe... but always giving them that professional appearance. (Squad Leader)

I could yell at them all day, until they're blue in the face and it just compounds the frustration....They will lose their faith... and it will just go all the way down the line until the whole platoon is completely a mess. (Platoon Sergeant)

An important aspect of this “professional image” is maintaining a positive attitude, even—or especially—when missions lack clarity. One Squad Leader described the importance of a positive attitude this way:

You have to keep a positive attitude. We know we're going to do missions that suck. But we're going to do them; not doing them is not an option. So you suck it up and get it done. As the squad leader, you have to set the example. (Squad Leader)

The positive attitude the Squad Leader describes is not Pollyannaish; it is grounded in full understanding of the difficult reality of the situation. But Squad Leaders recognize that, regardless of how much missions “suck,” they are “going to do them” and that “not doing them is not an option.” The volitional imperative is to understand the reality of doing the mission, to control your frustration, maintain a positive attitude, and commit yourself to giving your best effort all the time. A Platoon Leader summed it up this way:

Listen to your chain of command... Take care of your portion of the mission, just do your job to the best of your ability every time, don't give anything less than



your best that's basically a hundred percent all the time—is what you've got to do. And try to keep a positive attitude about things because we are going to be out here, we're going to be doing it no matter what, so you might as well do it with a smile on your face. (Platoon Leader)

*Maintaining good working relationships.* Closely related to controlling frustration and maintaining positive bearing is maintaining good working relationships within the unit. Working together under the stressful conditions of combat over the course of a 12-month deployment will strain the interpersonal relationships of even the tightest “band of brothers.” Yet, interpersonal tension only aggravates the stress and frustration caused by the complex and difficult mission. But whereas there is little soldiers can do to influence or control this external adversity, they can control stress caused by internal, interpersonal tension so as not to make things even more difficult. So, leaders emphasize the importance of maintaining strong, positive working relationships within the platoon, both among leaders and between leaders and soldiers to avoid causing any self-induced internal stress. One Squad Leader described the importance of positive working relationships this way:

We don't get to choose who we work with; it's kind of the roll of the dice. You get stuck with whoever the Army sticks you with and if you're always arguing over stuff or if you don't like somebody that makes it a lot harder to do this job especially with living in such close quarters and the working relationship we have with each other. So establishing a good working relationship whether you like someone or not I think is really important. (Squad Leader)

In maintaining positive working relationships, leaders emphasize and enforce several key principles. First, leaders emphasize the necessity of “respecting rank” to maintain the integrity of the chain of command within the platoon. Respecting rank means accepting and supporting those who hold formal leadership positions in the

platoon. It also means not disrespecting these leaders by losing your temper and walking away from problems. Respecting rank and refraining from “blatant disrespect” is highlighted as a reflection of a soldier’s discipline as the two quotes below illustrate.

Respecting your NCO's for the soldiers I think proves their discipline. Everybody has a different opinion on things, but leaders were put in the job for a reason. The more disciplined soldiers accept things the way they are and then adapt and I mean, they're not going to say that they agree necessarily, but they'll go with their leadership and support them. (Platoon Leader)

Everyone has to understand rank and the respect behind it. Blatant disrespect is not tolerated. You can't just lose your temper and you can't just walk away from a problem. We don't get to choose who we work with, like you don't get to choose your family. Our living quarters are tight; you have to put petty stuff behind you, be an adult, and focus on the job we have to do. (Platoon Sergeant)

Second, leaders emphasize the importance of “keeping it professional” when working out problems or issues. It requires that you put “petty stuff behind you, be an adult, and focus on the job we have to do.”

We all butt heads quite a bit but, you know, but we keep it professional and we do what we have to do even though sometimes we disagree with each other. We don't let egos get in the way even though sometimes, you know, you go get smashed on or something. We try to keep it as professional as possible especially in front of the guys. (Squad Leader)

You got to be an adult, be a professional, put the simple petty arguments behind you, and just realize you have job to do and do it. There are some things that really bother me. I'll go to the source and confront them about it. Then we talk about it like adults. There are other things that I just keep to myself and leave them alone because they're not worth bringing up. (Squad Leader)

Third, leaders emphasize the importance of supporting each other to maintaining positive relationships. Small unit leaders are “not territorial.” They recognize that completing missions successfully and getting through combat is a total team effort and everyone has to “keep an eye on each other,” “watch each other’s back,” and “keep the

focus on the platoon.” The focus is on being a “team player,” “being supportive of each other,” having “good communication,” and keeping the arguing and “bitching down to a minimum.”

We’re not territorial. The [Squad Leaders] work well together well. They help each other keep and eye on each other’s squads. You’ve got to be watching each other’s back and keep the focus on the platoon. We’re not a collection of three separate squads; we’re a platoon. (Platoon Sergeant)

You’ve got to be a team player. Not being a team player—purposely not pulling your weight or getting out of duties—is not tolerated. You’ve got to be very supportive of each other. (Squad Leader)

We really don’t argue that much, really no like heated arguments, but mission-wise if like something that we think that we feel that is ridiculous comes down, we keep the bitching down to a minimum. We don’t argue about too much. We have good communication and that is the key to having a good working relationship. (Squad Leader)

*Exercising restraint.* The final aspect of moral discipline is exercising restraint. There are times during missions when soldiers are tempted to take their frustrations out on the local Afghan population. This is a serious concern for small unit leaders. The ramifications of such a breakdown of discipline are devastating, not only personally for the soldiers involved, but potentially strategically. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are marred by actions at the small unit level, e.g., Abu Graihb, that had negative strategic consequences. Soldiers must have the discipline to restrain themselves, to control the amount of force and violence they inflict, and to always ensure they do not take out their frustrations on the civilian population. A Platoon Leader described the importance of exercising restraint this way:

It’s a very complex fight and all of the guys knew that. There’s a lot of times that you have to use restraint when you want to deal the death blossom, and the guys understand that. There’s a time to use a lot of force and there’s a time not to....

The biggest challenge is the tactical restraint that they have to exercise here, because I know the day we did [a mission] we had an [improvised explosive device] dead on and that was the first casualty in my platoon. And, I'll be honest with you, everybody in that platoon wanted to just put their barrels out and just start shooting and we couldn't do that. I think that's the biggest thing with the soldiers, showing restraint.... I just constantly talk to the guys about it, constantly. At all times, I've got to stop in a tent in the middle of the night and guys will be up playing video games and I just start shooting the shit with them and it would come up. Then I would explain it to them. They know what the overall mission is here, but it's just frustrating for them. (Platoon Leader)

The Platoon Leader in the quote above describes a situation in which his platoon was struck by an IED while on mission and suffered its first casualty. A situation like this is perhaps the greatest test of moral discipline: Emotions and frustrations are understandably at their most intense; soldiers feel a strong impulse to “fire the death blossom”—to take out their frustrations by “just start shooting.” But the ability to exercise restraint is an imperative and the leader must enforce it. The Platoon Leader describes how he “constantly talk[s] to the guys about it,” “explain[s] it to them.” Another Platoon Leader describes how he acts as the “voice of reason” and “keeps his guys “reeled in.” For these leaders, enforcing tactical restraint is not just a matter of protecting Afghan civilians, it is a matter of protecting their soldiers, not just from the legal consequences, but also their long-term mental health and wellbeing. Leaders do not want their soldiers to have to live with the regret of having harmed an innocent civilian.

The biggest challenge is how aggressive you're allowed to be going after the enemy; we're much less aggressive here. I'm the voice of reason; I don't want my Soldiers to regret shooting somebody. I keep my guys reeled in. (Platoon Leader)

*Summary.* The prototypical experience of combat is the firefight. It is in the firefight when soldiers experience acute forms of adversity that are typically associated

with combat, e.g., the intense fear that SSG K described in the introduction to these findings as well as “significant emotional events” such as suffering the loss of a close friend. These acute forms of adversity constitute significant challenges that leaders must deal with by exercising moral discipline.

Moral discipline is an intentional attitude or stance towards traumatic adversity of combat that involves a volitional habit of making best efforts to fulfill the obligations of duty and aspirations to honor. Moral discipline has both negative and positive dimensions. Put negatively, moral discipline is the habitual mode of self-control that makes it possible to avoid forming inappropriate attitudes in response to the reality of combat. In particular, it is to avoid such common ways that soldiers disengage, such as resignation and despair on the one hand, or anger and vengefulness on the other. Expressed positively, moral discipline involves maintaining an attitude toward the difficult and traumatic circumstances of combat that combines (1) acceptance of the harsh and bitter realities; (2) maintaining a balanced emotional response that tilts neither toward undue pessimism nor unrestrained anger; and (3) an undiminished commitment to exercise as much control and influence over circumstances as possible.

However, at risk of diminishing the significance of this traumatic adversity, the individual combat episode, firefight or TIC (Troops In Contact) constitutes one of a composite of experiences that make up the entire combat deployment. An equal and perhaps more pervasive challenge includes the less traumatic and more mundane forms of adversity that demand a different kind of discipline I call *practical discipline*. The

mundane adversity that constitutes the tedium of combat and practical discipline

necessary to counter it is the focus of the next two sections.

*Practical discipline.*

Discipline is not all about standing at parade rest and saying, “Yes, Sergeant” or “No, Sergeant.” That’s not what discipline is out here. It’s having the discipline to just do everyday stuff right. I mean it’s all the little stuff. Like, after a mission when everybody’s tired, I really don’t have to tell them to clean their weapons. I still tell them and I still check, but you can walk by their area, you know, after a firefight, and they’re wiping everything down, making sure it’s good to go. Or it’s like when you’re out on mission for three days, and it’s 110 degrees during the day and you’re fried and wondering, “What the [expletive] am I doing out here?”, it’s having the discipline to stay focused and to keep doing it as best you can. To me, that’s discipline at its finest. (Squad Leader)

In the military, the discipline of a soldier is often reflected in observance of certain formalities and protocols, such as a soldier responding with “Yes Sergeant” or “No Sergeant” to his sergeant’s questions. The adversity of combat, however, has a way of diminishing the importance leaders attach to such formal protocols and shifting their emphasis to more substantive issues that have real, practical impact on the mission and lives of soldiers. This is the point the Squad Leader quoted above. Discipline for him is not about the formalities of “standing at parade rest and saying, “Yes Sergeant” or “No Sergeant.” Rather, discipline for him is about an internalized capacity for self control to “stay focused” and “do everyday stuff right” like keeping your equipment and weapon clean and to “keep doing it as best you can” in and through the tedium of combat. This capacity for self-control in doing the important little things right I refer to as practical discipline.

Practical discipline focuses on the countless little day-in-and-day-out habits that enable soldiers in combat to stay mentally and physically healthy and properly rested and

focused to sustain a high level of performance for the duration of the deployment. There are three dimensions to practical discipline. The first has negative (prevention) focus on *fighting complacency* induced by the routine and monotony of combat. The second has a positive (promotion) focus on *achieving mastery* over the combat environment—the terrain, the weather and the enemy. The third involves avoiding burnout by maintaining a *balance* between too much and too little focus on discipline. This balance orientation recognizes that too much discipline can be as problematic as too little. The goal is to maintain a balance that optimizes current performance on missions with the need to sustain performance over the course of the 12-month deployment.

*Fighting complacency (prevention focus).* The prevention focus of practical discipline involves fighting complacency. As discussed above, one of the biggest challenges soldiers face in an environment of chronic and acute adversity is simply fulfilling their commitments day-in-and-day-out over the course of a 12-month deployment. The prevention aspect of practical discipline involves cultivating a conscientious attention and sensitivity to the everyday “little things.” It involves resisting the temptations, fatigue, and sheer boredom and monotony that tend to cause good habits to atrophy. The goal is discrepancy reduction—doing fewer things wrong and doing more things right. The volitional focus is to be prudent and precautionary with everything you do—“always checking,” “never assuming,” and “maintaining accountability.” Leaders describe three aspects of this prevention focus of practical discipline: staying on your game, doing the little things right, and always checking.

Staying on your game is a phrase used by a Platoon Leader to describe the mental discipline required to resist the temptation to become too relaxed and complacent.

Staying on your game involves making sure that as a leader you are staying effectively engaged in missions, but also making sure that your subordinates are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as well.

For me, I guess discipline is just not getting too relaxed and making sure I'm always on top of my game. Obviously there's times when I don't want to be in charge and—but, you know, you're always the one there and you're making the decision. And also just making sure that my NCOs are fulfilling the rules that they should be in the platoon is another thing that I think, you know, I need to always make sure is straight. (Platoon Leader)

One of the leadership challenges that I thought of was just I'm going to say, calling it staying on your game. You know day in and day out it just becomes so monotonous, but you owe it to your soldiers to go to the S2 section, find out what's going on to see if there's any way we can help the effort you know. It's you know, not just sitting around and playing video games and watching movies; it's maybe getting ahead on something whether it's counselings, finding out if a soldier is eligible for some kind of scholarship when he gets out, all sorts of stuff, just keeping yourself busy as a leader so you're not falling behind. Because that's the worst thing ever when a mission comes down and they say, "Where is the Platoon Leader?" and I've seen where [the Platoon Leader] is on season 12 of the "Sopranos" and they have no clue what's going on and the NCO's end up taking over the show. You know just staying on your game I guess I'd call it. (Platoon Leader)

The second aspect of fighting complacency is maintaining tactical discipline. Maintaining tactical discipline on mission is about paying attention to the little things—the "countless details," the "little things," and the "small stuff" that have to happen consistently and that cumulatively make the difference between success or failure, life or death.

Discipline—you're right. Discipline is a huge thing and having the discipline for all the little things is a lifesaver out here. Like weapons posture, pulling security, keeping the gear on, and everything is a huge thing because I think it's been one



of the things that my platoon personally has been awesome at and that's the reason we haven't been hit throughout the days that we've been walking through the green zone like other units have because when we're out there, you know, our guys take a knee rather than do a rucksack flop. (Squad Leader)

I can't stress those sort of small [tactical] disciplines enough because they keep guys safe. It keeps the enemy thinking, "Hey, those guys are out there serious." The enemy will mess with you when you're coming back, they're tired, they're hanging their heads low, they're spacing, you know, all those sort of things just go out the window. They're just putting their heads out and trying to get back. Those are the guys that get hit and get messed up. So like I said I think the small disciplines are pretty huge now. (Squad Leader)

Attention to detail includes things like continuous gear, weapons, and equipment maintenance—cleaning immediately after missions and being full mission ready all the time; taking good personal care of yourself—eat right, get sleep, keep clean, and stay in contact with family; and always performing gear and weapons checks before going on mission. This is a sampling of the "little things" that constitute discipline that help avoid complacency and keep soldiers alive in the field.

The third aspect of prevention focus ties closely to the first two: doing what leaders call "always checking." Reinforcing practical discipline is about performing checks continuously—staying on top of soldiers and making sure they have what they need to accomplish missions. Performing checks is a key small unit leader responsibility and something they internalize and integrate formally and informally into their daily "battle rhythm."

Another thing: always stay on top of your guys. Always, always stay on top of them, always spot check, always check out and see how their morale is doing never, never become complacent. (Squad Leader)

It's about constantly checking making sure everything is serviceable and we're not doing something stupid. You've got to make sure soldiers have what they need. You've got to ensure your packing list for missions—do spot checks, basic

PCCs/PCIs, chow, water, ammunition, essential gear; ensuring they have what they need for the mission and no more. (Squad Leader)

I wake up first and then wake my guys up and get them ready for the day and whatever tasks or missions we have. And then I supervise. There's an art to checking—the art of checking without harassing or micro managing. I keep it informal, I joke with them, but I'm still checking and they know it. (Squad Leader)

*Achieving mastery (promotion focus).* The positive aspect of discipline has a promotion focus that involves “always improving” to maximize proficiency and competence in achieving high standards of performance. This promotion focus is concerned with advancement, growth, achievement, and excellence. The goal is to achieve mastery in the performance of missions and tasks. The motivation is to make progress by “always improving.” It entails the striving to master core mission-related skills in combat through constant focus on details, training, learning, and adapting, etc. The primary focus of achieving mastery is learning, adapting, and developing high levels of competence.

In striving to achieve mastery, leaders focus on three different practical aspects of discipline: building physical endurance, mastering the basics of their jobs, and focusing on “always improving” in contrast to “always checking,” which is the orientation in the prevention focus.

Building physical endurance involves developing the physical strength and stamina required to operate in a combat environment. Combat for the infantry, especially the foot-mobile platoons with whom I was embedded, is physically demanding. Soldiers must develop the strength and stamina to endure it. The quotes below from a Squad

Leader and Platoon Leader are illustrative of the importance attached to building the requisite physical endurance.

But physically, like I think my Platoon is physically in better shape, better shooters, stronger, you know the physical aspect, we're just—we're head and shoulders better than the other Platoons, and I think that's what we pride ourselves in. And if physically you're in better shape, you're going to win firefights. It's just going to go hand in hand. You're not going to be as tired, and it's going to allow you to move on the better. (Squad Leader)

After mission, the guys, when they're off of mission, will immediately go to the hooch, get on their PTs, and go to the gym. It's just the constant of getting better and getting better; getting better and better. (Platoon Leader)

The second aspect of promotion focus is mastering the basics. To adapt and gain mastery of missions and tasks in the tactical environment, small unit leaders train their soldiers to cope, prepare, and perform no matter what the situation. The intent is to keep improving continually and to always be better than the enemy.

Staying on top of old school basics—the way you pull security, the way you present your guys, present yourself when you're on a foot patrol during the day or whatnot. Things like that are things you learned back in the day but you didn't really think they were serious, like target detection skills, noise and light discipline, stuff like that. Those things are invaluable here and especially here because a lot of times it is old school Ranger School tactics that I think will make it happen. (Squad Leader)

It's nothing fancy. It's about maintaining focus on the basics and mastering the fundamentals—getting the Joes to skill level 1, team leaders to skill level 2, and squad leaders to skill level 3. (Squad Leader)

Mastering the basics requires a continual focus on training, even though they are in combat. The focus on training is based on the recognition that platoons never do everything right, that there is always a need to learn and improve.

A lot of people think that they don't have to train because they're on deployment; but I'm pretty sure we don't do everything right all the time. You have to keep

training and making sure that your Soldiers know how to do tasks at hand. (Squad Leader)

We train to make the basics reflexive. They need to be reflexive when you're tired and getting shot. So you have to make sure everything is reflexive. (Squad Leader)

In addition, small unit leaders emphasize cross-training. Through the course of deployment, platoons lose soldiers continuously due to a number of factors—injury, sickness, leave, extended details, and casualties. Platoons rarely operate at full strength; average platoon strength is often only around 20 soldiers, barely half of what they should have. Soldiers need to be trained on all the platoon weapons systems in order to be able to “cover down” and maintain the platoon’s mission capability.

We do a lot of classes to cross-train everybody. You lose too many guys to injury, leave, and guard details. You can't afford to lose a key weapons system because someone's out. You've got to cross-train on everything so you can spread load and change up weapons systems if you lose somebody. I have the soldiers teach each other. They learn better that way.

The third aspect of mastering the basics involves a focus on always improving. This is the mental mindset that underpins the promotion focus of achieving mastery.

It's about always improving continually. I'm always on top of my guys. It's a love-hate relationship. I'll get them up early to do some sort of training. At the time, I'm sure inside their head, they're cussing me out; they're hating life. But at the end of the day when they put their head on the pillow, their like, “My NCO made me better today because we did this training or we accomplished this.” As an NCO, I'm always looking for ways to make my team better, the platoon better. I think I'm a little [obsessive compulsive disorder] but I think that's what makes a good NCO. (Team Leader)

One of the biggest things I learned from a previous Platoon Sergeant is that once you think you're at the top of something, at the top of some sort of skill, that's when you're starting to go bad. You never stop at finding out ways to do something better; you're always researching or always training to make yourself better. (Team Leader)

*Balancing work and rest (balance focus).* The third aspect of practical discipline involves achieving and maintaining a balance between the positive/promotion and negative/prevention orientations. This balance orientation recognizes that too much discipline can be as problematic as too little. The goal is to achieve the right balance that optimizes current performance on missions while taking the time between missions to recover to avoid burnout.

The operational tempo for small units is what many small unit leaders describe as “grueling.” Soldiers take a physical and mental beating over the course of the deployment—“guys get broke.” On combat outposts, most companies operate on a rotational cycle: two mission platoons and one force protection platoon. Mission cycles can last anywhere from one week to sometimes as long as three weeks. As mission platoon, platoons average two missions every three days, combined with occasional larger operations that can last several days or a week. During mission cycles, sleep schedules are disrupted and erratic. Furthermore, austere living conditions on combat outposts offer few amenities and little opportunity to rest and recuperate. Over the course of a 12-month deployment, recurrent mission cycles and high-operational tempo wear soldiers down and out. Burnout—physical and mental—becomes a significant leadership challenge.

Small unit leaders are alert to signs of complacency and burnout: fatigue, stress, lapses in discipline standards, and reduced morale. They recognize the need to maintain a difficult balance between pushing soldiers hard and maintaining the operational tempo and allowing them adequate downtime to rest and prevent the collapse of unit morale. It

requires them to be aware of the limits of their soldiers' endurance and work to counteract the effects. Small unit leader activities to fight complacency and prevent burnout can be categorized into two main focus areas: prioritizing mission readiness and balance work and rest.

In order to focus discipline, leaders prioritize mission readiness over other things that are deemed less important in combat. The need to prioritize is based on the insight that, while "everything requires discipline," leaders cannot practically demand "100 percent total and complete discipline at all times" or else they risk burning soldiers out quicker than they would otherwise. A Platoon Sergeant described it this way:

Everything requires discipline—there's no ifs, ands, or buts about it. But in reality, if you require 100 percent total and complete discipline at all times, you wear your soldiers out and very quickly.... So what you do is you steer their discipline towards the right means. And you know for me the thing that is 100 percent total and absolute discipline and I won't [expletive] budge on it is anything outside the wire. Inside the wire, we taper off on the discipline. And it doesn't mean that we're losing discipline; we're just focusing our discipline in other areas. (Platoon Sergeant)

The Platoon Sergeant describes how he prioritizes and focuses the practice of discipline in his platoon. He focuses on those aspects of discipline that pertain to "anything outside the wire"; that is, he prioritizes discipline on what my informants call "mission readiness." This focus on mission readiness is effectively illustrated by the Squad Leader in the quote below:

I focus on everything that has to do with mission: [pre-combat checks], [pre-combat inspections], water, sleep, calling home, family contact, gear, equipment, radio fills, weapons maintenance, [physical training], hygiene. We slack off on non-mission essential stuff: appearance, haircuts, sleeves, uniforms. If it makes sense for the mission, that's what we focus on. (Squad Leader)

Both the Platoon Sergeant and Squad Leader recognize a need to “slack off” on “non-mission essential stuff” that normally gets a high priority in a non-combat environment such as home station back in the United States. But both leaders emphasize that tapering off on non-mission essential aspects of discipline does not mean they are “losing discipline”; it just means that they are focusing their practice of discipline on high priority areas. Their experience teaches them that if they “give” on discipline in certain non-mission essential areas, they “get back everything [they] need in spades” in the areas that are mission essential, as the quote below illustrates.

Inside the COP, you let guys wear [physical training uniform] because it’s so hot. You let guys wear baseball caps once a week. That stuff right there is complete freaking blasphemy, but what you do is you realize that if you give a little in some areas that aren’t important, you get back everything you need in spades. And that’s what I’ve seen since we’ve eased up some of the stupid [expletive] that doesn’t matter. (Platoon Sergeant)

In fact, most leaders draw a hard and firm line on discipline associated with mission readiness as the quote below from a Platoon Leader illustrates:

When you’re outside the wire, you’re switched on. It means your weapon is clean; it means you’ve changed out all your batteries; it means you have good crystal clear [radio communications] and you’re maintaining those [radio communications]. And make sure that you’ve done extensive planning; that the plan that you set up makes sense based on what’s been done before and the patterns you’ve set; and that you have the proper support set in place for the mission that you want to do. (Platoon Leader)

The second aspect of balance involves balancing work and rest. Soldiers need downtime, even in combat where there is always something pressing to be done. The Army and the infantry in particular has what my informants call a “mission-first culture.” The infantry especially hold themselves to a “level of toughness” and a “can do” attitude that can be counterproductive when not practiced with some prudence. Prudence here

involves knowing when to stop “pushing your soldiers” and to “back off” and give them some personal downtime. The quotes below are illustrative of this practical aspect of balancing work and rest.

The Army has a mission-first culture. We hold infantry to a level of toughness and it sometimes leads to our downfall. The fatigue of being out here and operating 24 x 7—you have to learn the dynamics of your own squad, know when you can push them and when you need to back off. (Platoon Sergeant)

You have to balance [operational] tempo and rest cycle, maintaining standards and allowing the guys to relax. People get burned out easy; you have to ensure soldiers get a break. Too much discipline can be a problem; relaxing some standards has huge impact on troop morale. Generally, if it’s not mission essential, I back off. (Platoon Sergeant)

Everybody gets tired; they get cooped up; it’s the mental side of deployment. You have to ensure that they guys get downtime. You can’t train all the time, you can’t burn them out. When all the work is done, you have to “disappear” and leave them alone, let them get some personal time and do what they want. (Squad Leader)

You have to keep an eye on the troops during high [operational] tempo—you can get lost in it. You need to keep a clear eye on morale and welfare of the troops [because] guys will get run down and will not tell you. We have really high standards in this COIN fight and they really need ways to decompress from the stress. (Squad Leader)

An important practice associated with maintaining balance is keeping close tabs on soldiers’ physical, mental, and emotional health. Leaders emphasize the importance of continuously checking their soldiers and keeping close tabs on their welfare. This involves a daily routine of checking what leaders describe as their “AO”—their area of operations where their soldiers sleep, eat, and live when not on mission. Leaders stay in constant dialog with their soldiers. This dialog is typically informal and conversational. The focus is listening to the soldier to assess how he is doing. Leaders huddle daily and as part of their daily status updates to discuss how soldiers are doing. In this way, leaders



are able to know when they are able to push their soldiers, and when they might be in need of some down time.

We keep close tabs on the soldiers. The leadership team huddles up daily. The Platoon Sergeant gathers the squad leaders to discuss day-to-day welfare of the soldiers and any issues within the platoon—cleanliness of our AO, Facebook issues, pay issues, laundry, showers, monthly counseling. (Platoon Leader)

You have to go around your AO and check on your soldiers—talking with them, getting face-to-face time with each Joe, seeing if they have any issues. You have to talk with them about what's going on, making sure they're getting their PT, hygiene, sleep, keeping up on their maintenance. You have to watch your guys and make sure their not injured; they'll want to push through injuries. (Squad Leader)

You have to ensure your guys are staying connected with loved ones. It gets personal. I just bought flowers for a soldier whose sister just died of cancer. Every soldier down to the lowest private that no one likes needs to know he's part of a team. You have to tie your guys into the unit. (Platoon Leader)

**Summary.** Arguably more than any other human activity, continuous combat operations against an adaptive enemy in a harsh and alien environment over the course of a 12-month deployment takes a toll on soldiers, severely straining their physical, mental, and moral stamina. Volitional discipline is about the moral and practical habits of self-control to necessary to successfully resist adversity and uphold the normative standards of leadership. It involves corrective habits of thought and action that correspond to and counteract the effects of adversity—moral discipline to counteract the effects of the trauma of combat and practical discipline to counteract the effects of the tedium of combat.

Volitional discipline is corrective in the sense that it makes up or compensates for some deficiency in motivation in situations where there is some temptation or adversity to be resisted. If soldiers in combat did not suffer from weakness of will in its diverse

forms, there would be no need to cultivate discipline. However, soldiers in combat (and people in general) do suffer acute as well as chronic deficiencies in motivation.

Discipline involves habits in that it reflects a cultivated predisposition to respond to adversity in ways that accord with the values and principles embedded in the normative standards of leadership. Corrective habits of thought and action—discipline—are what bridge the gap between a leader’s commitment to duty and honor and the normative standards of leadership and their ability to realize those commitments in action with some degree of reliable success in the face of countervailing adversity. In total, duty, honor, and discipline constitute the motivational and volitional structure of the character to lead.

### **Summary Empirical Observations**

As noted above, the emergent concept of leader character presented in this study is inspired by the striking observation that leaders observed in this study so frequently and so consistently demonstrated the extraordinary willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity. Though there are times when they fail to do what leadership demands or fail to realize the demands the fullest extent, more often I observed leaders such as SSG K doing “the hard right” despite adversity and personal risk. To understand the source of this extraordinary performance—the intra-personal agentic capacities that give rise to it—became the driving purpose of the study.

The central components of the character to lead—commitment, duty, honor, and discipline—are posited to be the core concepts of an agentic structure of leader character that explains this extraordinary performance. These concepts reflect the internalization of a distinct normative orientation that predisposes the leader to uphold the standards of

leadership. Associated with this normative orientation are certain strong evaluations (Taylor, 1989). Strong evaluations refer to criteria by which leaders evaluate the moral quality of leadership—their own or others—that goes beyond behavioral compliance with standards. I alluded to this concept in my earlier discussion of the standard to take care of soldiers. A quote from a Platoon Sergeant illustrated the essence of strong evaluations. The Platoon Sergeant made a sharp contrast between leaders who are “in it for themselves” and their own awards and performance appraisals and those leaders who are committed to their soldiers and for whom awards and appraisals “mean nothing.” The Platoon Sergeant condemned those leaders who are “in it for themselves” as unworthy and undeserving of being a leader. This evaluation is decisive. It suggests no wiggle room, caveats or qualifications. It is categorical: “If you’re in it for yourself, then you don’t deserve to be a leader and you need to go.”

Strong evaluations are distinct in that they go beyond judgments about the behavior or even effectiveness of a leader’s performance; rather they concern the worthiness of the motivations underlying that performance. In this sense, these evaluations involve depth because what weighs with them is not just the consequences of action, but the quality of the leader’s motivations and how they reflect the kind of person someone is. Strong evaluations therefore concern a leader’s inherent moral worth as a person based on his consistency in living up to the normative standards of leadership.

The following example provides insights into the depth and potency of strong evaluations. The example concerns an NCO who faked a knee injury to get out of going

on mission. The excerpts below are from an interview I conducted with the NCOs peer—a Squad Leader in another platoon.

*Interviewer:* Just this morning, you were talking about someone, an NCO, and you said he's a “[expletive] coward.” That’s pretty strong condemnation. Explain that.

*Squad Leader:* Going back a few months ago when the fighting season started, we didn't know what to really expect from the enemy.... Once things started getting harder – the missions got more difficult and we were getting a lot of more [firefights] – that was one guy that we all feel faked a knee injury to get out of going on mission. Since then he’s been working in the [Tactical Operations Center (TOC)]....

One of his guys got shot in the head, which I understand is hard, but I mean [expletive] it could happen to any of us. But NCOs like that always slide by and that kind of character is indicative of just a piece of [expletive]. Guys like me and [the other NCOs] you know, they're just good [expletive] guys. They understand that everybody's got a family back home, everybody's scared. I'm [expletive] scared. It’s just not an excuse. That’s what I mean by ‘[expletive] coward.’”

The Squad Leader’s comments reflect strong condemnation of the NCO. There are two aspects to this condemnation. The first involves a relatively straightforward moral judgment about the wrongness of the act itself. Faking a knee injury to get out of mission is clearly inconsistent with the standards of leadership and constitutes a gross dereliction of his commitment to duty. For this reason the Squad Leader expresses his strong condemnation.

But the full moral force of the Squad Leader’s evaluation goes beyond a surface level moral judgment about the wrongness of the *act per se*, and involves a condemnation of the NCO himself as a person. The Squad Leader calls the NCO a “[expletive] coward” and “piece of [expletive].” This is an expression of contempt, a moral attitude directed towards the NCO himself. The Squad Leader holds the NCO in contempt not just

because he fakes a knee injury, but because he fakes a knee injury *in order to* “get out of going on mission.” It is the moral unworthiness of this motivation that triggers the Squad Leader’s condemnation not just of the behavior, but of the NCO himself and specifically his cowardly character.

The depth of this contempt comes out when we consider what it is to condemn the NCO and his action despite of legitimate reasons for doing it. The NCO fakes a knee injury in order to get out of missions because he wants something that everyone recognizes as legitimate. He lost one of his soldiers in a fire fight. He is scared: he does not want to get hurt or killed, nor does he want to see any more of his soldiers get hurt or killed. The Squad Leader acknowledges this concern and even expresses some empathy: “One of his guys got shot in the head, which I understand is hard.” However, despite his empathy, the Squad Leader categorically rejects this motivation as a legitimate excuse to fake a knee injury to get out of missions: “It’s just not an excuse.” Everyone has the same concern, the same fear and anxiety: “Everybody’s scared. I’m [expletive] scared”; “everybody’s got a family back home”; getting shot in the head “could happen to any of us.” But “everybody” is not faking a knee injury to get out of missions; only the cowardly NCO.

The condemnation of the NCO as a coward is made stronger by the contrast the Squad Leader makes with other NCOs who are just “good [expletive] guys.” “Good” is an evaluative term; it reflects positive regard—a moral attitude of *respect* for these other NCOs in contrast to the moral attitude of *contempt* for the cowardly NCO. These other NCOs are good *not* because they are not scared or not concerned about their families

back home; they are good because despite having these same fears and anxieties, they continue to risk and sacrifice and go on mission. This contrast between the cowardly NCO and the good NCOs gets to the essence of strong evaluations.

Between the contempt for the cowardly NCO and the respect for the other good NCOs, there emerges a sharp separation. This separation is not a matter of *degree*, but of *kind*. By faking a knee injury, the cowardly NCO proves himself to be the *kind of person* who in the face of adversity, yields cravenly to fear and selfishness at the expense of his commitment to uphold the standards of leadership. This demonstrates a lack of character which makes him unworthy of trust and respect and hence unworthy of being a leader. By contrast the good NCOs, by continuing to go on mission despite fear and anxiety, prove themselves to be the *kind of persons* who in the adversity of combat, uphold their commitment to the standards of leadership at the expense of their own self-interests and risk to their lives. This demonstrates their character, which makes them worthy of trust and respect and worthy of being leaders.

**The normative question revisited.** The moral vision implicit in the character to lead entails a deferential regard for something beyond one's self. A leader who has internalized in the form of normative commitments a sense of duty, honor, and discipline is motivated by a central fact: that there is something important beyond the leader himself and his immediate personal inclinations that is worthy of his deep-felt commitment and sacrifice. From this perspective, in approaching situations like those faced by SSG K, the question is not, "How can I avoid walking point or low crawling up the hill?" It is the morally-laden questions that ask, "What is expected of me as a leader in this situation?"

Where does my duty lay?” and “Given that I care about my moral worth as a leader, what should I be motivated to do? What in this situation is worthy of being a leader and the respect of my brothers in arms?”

The normative orientation implicit in these questions reflect a sense of having been entrusted with something—the duty and honor of leading soldiers in combat. That that duty and honor is a larger cause of intrinsic worth to a leader who “cares”; and it is the leader’s conscientious concern reinforced by habits of moral and practical discipline to uphold this cause for its own sake, over the long course of the combat deployment in such a way as to live up to the normative standards of leadership without subverting the values embedded in them. In short, the moral motivation of combat leaders reflects a strong sense of trusteeship: Combat leaders with character are those who in and through their identity-conferring normative commitment to the standards of leadership are members of a moral community entrusted with and dedicated to uphold the standards of leadership and the values, principles and ideals embedded in them. This distinct normative orientation associated with the character to lead is captured succinctly in the response of a young Sergeant. This Sergeant, call him SGT P, was a member of SSG K’s squad and had been promoted to Sergeant and Team Leader during the deployment due in large part to the high quality of the leadership he exhibited in combat. When I asked him what it means to be a leader, he responded succinctly and without hesitation: “Leading soldiers, it’s a privilege.”

## Chapter 6

### **DISCUSSION**

Building on the presentation of findings, this chapter provides an in-depth examination of how the emergent data and model (re-illustrated in Figure 6.1) provide insight into the study's overarching objective to understand the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance in combat. This examination begins with leader agency and the dialectical tension between the standards of leadership and the adversity of combat which provide the theoretical framework for the concept of leader character emergent in this study. With this theoretical framing, I then discuss the key concepts and relationships associated with the agentic structure of leader character. I conclude this chapter with focused answers to the guiding research questions outlined in Chapter 3, followed by a discussion of the study's implications and limitations to provide a way ahead for future research.



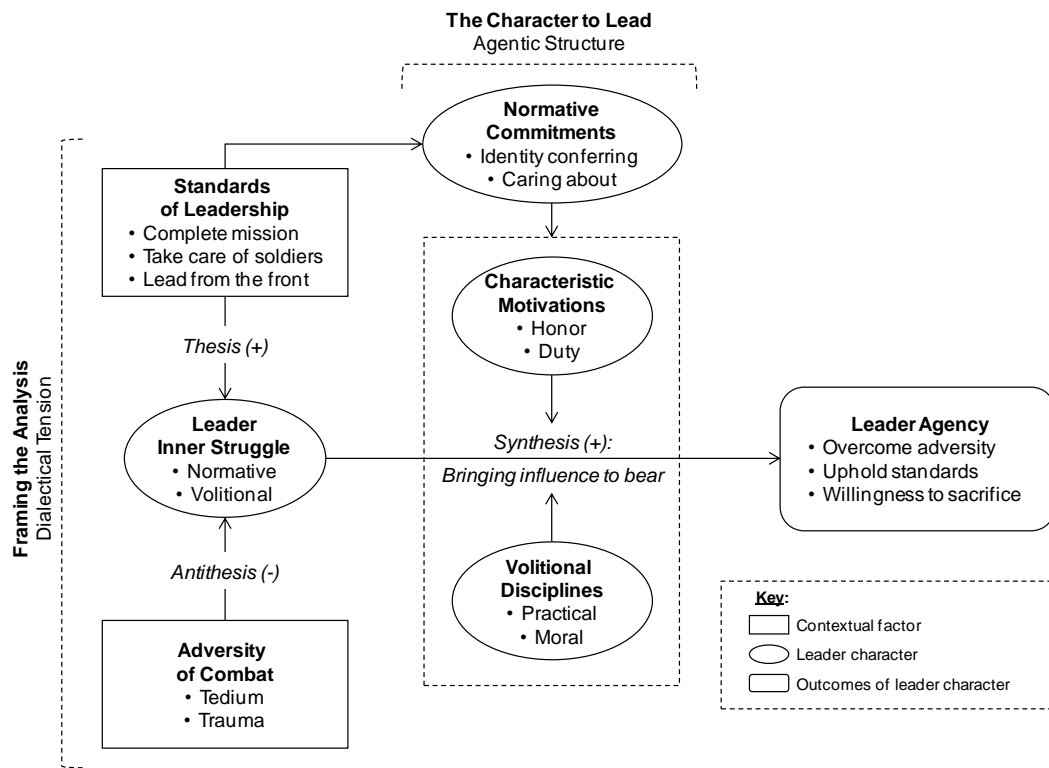


Figure 6.1. Emergent conceptual rendering of leader character and its significance to the practice of leadership in combat.

### Framing the Analysis: Leader Agency and the Dialectics of Character

The concept of leader character emergent in this study is inspired by the striking observation that leaders in this study so frequently and consistently demonstrated extraordinary performance characterized by the *willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity*. This performance I describe as a strong form of personal moral agency. I describe it as *agency* because it involves the leader bringing influence to bear on himself—on his own functioning, on environmental events, as well as on others (Bandura, 1986). It is a form of *personal* and *moral* agency because this influence is exercised individually by the leader and directed towards upholding normative standards of leadership (Bandura, 1986; Brown et al., 2005). And it is a *strong*

form of agency because this influence is exercised in the face of countervailing adversity—the tedium and trauma of combat—and even at risk of life. This notion of the primacy of *leader agency* over adversity constitutes the critical empirical insight that informs the theoretical framework for the concept of leader character emergent in this study.

Figure 6.1 frames this phenomenon of leader agency as the outcome of a dialectical tension between the adversity of combat and the standards of leadership. In dialectical models, conflicts emerge between entities espousing opposing thesis and antithesis. The conflict between the thesis and antithesis is in turn influenced by a third factor that results in an emergent synthesis (van de Ven, 1992; van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

In Figure 6.1, the thesis is represented by the *standards of leadership* that make strong normative claims on leaders; these represent a positive social influence that leaders must uphold. The antithesis is represented by the *adversity of combat*, which stands in the way of leaders upholding standards; adversity represents a negative environmental influence that leaders must resist. The adversity of combat and the standards of leadership thus constitute strong opposing forces acting on the leader. This dialectical tension reflects an important aspect of agency in that it recognizes that leaders, as individuals, do not operate as autonomous agents (Bandura, 2008); their agency is both socially embedded in the standards of leadership and environmentally situated in the adversity of combat.

Inherent in this dialectical tension is the *leader's inner struggle* to bring influence to bear in resisting adversity and upholding standards. The psychological resources and

capabilities that enable a leader to resolve this inner struggle are explained by the *character to lead*. The agentic structure of the character to lead presented in Figure 6.1 is rooted in the internalization of the standards of leadership in the form of normative commitments and entails both motivational and volitional resources necessary for the leader to bring influence to bear in a way that achieves a *synthesis*. This synthesis reflects the dual inhibitive and proactive nature of personal moral agency in that it involves both the power to resist and overcome adversity as well as the power to uphold and affirm standards (Bandura, 2004). Leader character, therefore, is posited to be the decisive third factor in this dialectical model that explains the strong form of personal moral agency characteristic of extraordinary leader performance in combat.

The agency-based dialectical model emergent in this study offers a novel approach to understanding the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance. As highlighted in the literature review, character is long believed important to leadership and yet, a framework for understanding the complex nature of character and the role it plays in leadership does not fully exist (Sosik & Cameron, 2010). Prevailing approaches tend to define leader character in terms of virtues and character strengths believed important to positive forms of leadership, e.g., authentic, transformational, ethical, etc. (cf., Thompson & Riggio, 2010). However, these approaches are criticized for their abstract and idealistic trait-based taxonomies that do not account adequately for the socially embedded and situationally dynamic realities of character and leadership (e.g., Conger & Hollenbeck, 2010).

An important contribution of this study is that the emergent concept of leader character is fully situated in the leader's social and environmental context as reflected in the dialectical tension between the standards of leadership and the adversity of combat. Rather than traits as the locus of leader character, agentic resources important to resolving the dialectical tension emerge as the locus of leader character. Character is thus defined by the leader's agentic capability to *bring influence to bear* in upholding standards associated with the practice of leadership and resisting adversity associated with the environment of combat. The capability to bring influence to bear that is central to this agentic approach to character is also central to the concept of leadership, the essence of which is the influence a leader brings to bear on others as well as him or herself to achieve group or organizational goals and objectives (Manz & Sims, 1980, 1987; Northouse, 2013). This agentic approach through its focus on bringing influence to bear provides a more explicit theoretical explanation for the relationship between leader character and extraordinary leader performance than provided by prevailing trait-based approaches.

In sum, prevailing trait-based conceptions explain leader character in terms of "top down" theoretically derived ideal personality attributes—virtues and character strengths—believed important to leadership. The emergent agency-based approach explains leader character in terms of "bottom up" agentic capabilities that enable a leader to bring personal influence to bear in upholding standards and resisting adversity. This macro-level distinction highlights the overall contribution of this study to understanding the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance in combat.

With this theoretical framing, I now provide an in-depth discussion of the key concepts and relationships associated with the agentic structure of leader character. The focal concept around which this discussion is organized is the leader's inner struggle which represents the internalization of the dialectical tension between the standards of leadership and adversity of combat. The findings presented in the previous chapter identified two dimensions of this inner struggle: normative and volitional. The normative struggle revolves around the fact that the standards of leadership make strong normative demands on leaders: they require that leaders push themselves to the limits of their physical strength and endurance; that leaders subordinate their self-interests for the welfare of their soldiers; and that they accept grave responsibility and even risk their lives for the sake of the mission and their soldiers. The normative dimension of the leader's inner struggle thus concerns how leaders internalize and integrate these standards as personal commitments such that they possess the self-motivation to uphold them even at risk to their life.

In contrast to the normative struggle which concerns the *internalization* of standards, the volitional struggle concerns the *externalization* of standards; that is, it concerns how standards once internalized by the leader, are then enacted in the face of adversity consistently over time with reliable success in doing so. Specifically, it revolves around the fact that in combat, leaders are besieged by permanent and pervasive adversity: by the acute fear from an enemy attack, the chronic anxiety of persistent risk and danger and the emotional stress of losing close friends; by the physical and mental fatigue of difficult missions, the persistent stress of a high operational tempo, and the

monotony of routine and tedious tasks; and by the hardship of an austere environment and the loneliness separation from home, family, and friends. Under these conditions, besieged by the corrosive and cumulative effects of adversity, sustaining the motivation to uphold the standards of leadership becomes a significant challenge for leaders. The volitional struggle thus concerns how leaders sustain their motivation to uphold standards of leadership in and through the adversity of combat.

The normative and volitional struggles capture the inner dialectics at the center of the agentic structure of leader character emergent in this study. From this perspective, the key to understanding the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance entails understanding how leaders resolve these normative and volitional struggles such that they are able to bring influence to bear in resisting adversity and upholding standards even at great risk and sacrifice. The following discussion of key concepts and relationships presents this analysis in two main parts corresponding to the two dimensions of the leader's inner struggle. The first part concerns the normative struggle and the leader's internalization of the standards of leadership. The second part concerns the volitional struggle and the leader's capacity to realize those standards in action in the face of adversity.

### **The Normative Struggle: Internalization of the Standards of Leadership**

**Standards of leadership.** Leadership is commonly understood as a social process. As a social process, the focal concern is typically the interactions between leaders and followers—leader behaviors and follower attitudes and behaviors—and the instrumental effectiveness of the leader in bringing influence to bear in accomplishing

group or organizational goals and objectives (Northouse, 2013). However, leading in combat is more than a social process, it is also a *social practice*. The key distinction is that as a social practice, it is governed by certain normative standards that define what it means to be a combat leader, including notions of conduct that gain a leader merit, praise or honor, as well as conduct that is regarded as bad, wrong or intolerable (MacIntyre, 2007). As a social practice, the focal concern is not just the instrumental effectiveness of the leader's performance; but also normative evaluations about the worthiness of the leader's motivations that underpin that performance.

For example, the leaders observed in this study demonstrate a strong normative orientation towards subordinating personal self-interests to duties and obligations attached to their role as a leader. This is because leadership in combat is a grave responsibility in that those entrusted with it often hold the lives of their fellow soldiers in their hands. Leaders who put their self-interests ahead of their responsibilities are a risk and threat not only to the mission, but to the lives of their soldiers. Therefore, the character of combat leaders tends to reflect this strong sense of obligation to duty over self-interests. Soldiers in turn expect their leaders to exhibit this strong commitment to duty and will evaluate the leader in large part based on his or her consistency in upholding this as well as other standards.

This example underscores the fact that leadership in combat begins with the idea that leaders are first and foremost members of a moral community engaged in a social practice that is governed by certain standards valued by that community. The standards that govern the practice of leadership in combat were depicted in Figure 5.2 in the

previous chapter. My leader informants frequently refer to these standards in explaining their actions. Lead from the front is one of the most frequently expressed along with complete the mission and take care of soldiers. These three in particular constitute the primary standards around which the practice of leadership in combat is governed.

These standards are not properly understood as checklists of discrete attributes or behaviors, but more like fuzzy sets of beliefs that reveal a certain normative orientation towards the practice of combat leadership. Embedded in these standards are the guiding beliefs—values, principles and ideals—that characterize this community of infantry combat leaders. They are thus highly normative in that they make strong claims on leaders: they are authoritative; they carry moral significance; and they obligate leaders to certain courses of action, e.g., completing the mission, taking care of soldiers, and leading from the front. These standards therefore, serve as a kind of reference point—a set of normative criteria—around which the character of the leader is formed and evaluated (Bandura, 2008; Higgins, 1990).

Leader character from this perspective is very much social in its constitution. It is inseparable from the moral culture and social practice in which it is embedded and engaged. In significant ways, leader character reflects, even incarnates, this moral culture. It is this moral culture given practical expression in the standards that govern the practice of leadership that animates leader character—provides purpose, direction and meaning that is intelligible to leaders embedded in this particular community of Army infantry leaders. The concept of leader character emergent in this study thus begins with



the standards that govern the practice of leadership that provide the normative grounding upon which the character of the leader is shaped, formed and evaluated.

What makes these normative standards especially and personally significant to the leader is that they are demanding standards to uphold in combat. The demands of leadership in combat are clearest in certain “hard” situations leaders face: when the adversity of combat and the standards of leadership clash to demand difficult things of leaders, even that they should be prepared to sacrifice their lives. In the illustration used to introduce this study, the situation SSG K faced in the ambush was hard in this respect and the action he took in “low crawling up that hill under fire” reflects a willingness to sacrifice. In taking this action, SSG K stands a strong chance of getting shot, wounded, or even killed. He acknowledged feeling acute fear. Yet, he explained that as the “senior man” he felt he had to “lead from the front.” This is what the standards of leadership demand in combat; they demand that leaders be prepared and willing to risk and even sacrifice their lives. This is the root of the normative dimension of the leader’s inner struggle.

**The normative struggle.** The normative struggle concerns how leaders internalize the standards of leadership such that they are willing to risk and even sacrifice their lives to uphold them. SSG K’s willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership is a dramatic case of the normative struggle. But even when the struggle is not so dramatic, it is pervasive and inherent to leadership in combat. As a practical matter, it involves restraining the impulse to yield to the fear, fatigue, pain, suffering and frustration inflicted by the adversity of combat; and affirming in and through actions, the

normative values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards of leadership. This is the volitional dimension of the leader's inner struggle which I will address later. At a deeper level, however, the normative dimension of this struggle involves coming to terms with the hard demands that the standards of leadership impose on leaders. This requires more than mustering the will or the self-control to do what the standards demand—what my informants describe as “doing the hard right over the easy wrong.” It concerns a more fundamental evaluation, especially in the face of sacrifice and the loss of close friends in combat, of whether doing the hard right is worth it in the first place. Specifically, it concerns how leaders understand and justify the normative claims the standards of leadership make on them.

In the findings presented in Chapter 5, I illustrated this normative struggle with an example of a Platoon Leader who had just lost one of his squad leaders in a firefight. In my interview with him, he acknowledged doubts about whether the loss was worth it: “What’s the point?” The Platoon Leader recognized that being a combat leader means accepting loss, but in this particular hard situation, he did not feel that the losses are “always justified.” On the contrary, he stated that he “would not trade [his squad leader] for a 100 or a 1,000 Afghans.”

The Platoon Leader's questioning the sacrifice demanded of leaders gets to the heart of the normative struggle: If the standards of leadership demand that leaders risk and even sacrifice their lives, then there ought to be a reason compelling enough to justify the sacrifice; what is that reason that justifies the sacrifice? This is what philosophers call the normative question that is at the center of this inner struggle (Korsgaard, 2010).

Understanding how leaders justify the normative demands imposed on them by the standards of leadership emerged as central to understanding the agentic structure of leader character in combat.

The answer to the normative question is not a third-person theoretical explanation, but is a first-person explanation from the perspective of the person who must actually do what the standards demand (Korsgaard, 2010). Insights into how leaders answer the normative question and resolve this dimension of the leader's inner struggle are gleaned from their descriptions of the hard reality of upholding the standards of leadership in combat. They describe it as "sobering," "eye opening," a "wake up call," a "wall that hits you," and a "reality check." It makes them realize the gravity and seriousness of their responsibility as a leader. They describe the challenge of dealing with this hard reality as a "personal fight" that is "life changing": it requires them to "grow up"; "re-evaluate [their] life"; and "realize [that they are] not kid[s] anymore."

These comments suggest that resolving the normative struggle involves a kind of self-regulation; but not self-regulation in the narrow mechanistic sense of suggested by homeostatic (e.g., thermostat) models of self-control (Carver & Scheier, 1981). Rather it involves self-regulation in a deeper sense of fundamentally altering the self (Baumeister et al., 2009). This deeper sense of self-regulation penetrates the deep structure of the leader's basic values, beliefs and desires (Lord & Hall, 2005). It involves re-evaluating these basic values, beliefs and desires in light of the demands associated with the practice of leadership. This deep self-regulation is "life changing" in that it is self-changing.

All this suggests that what is involved in the normative struggle is internalization—a “taking in” of the standards of leadership—and integrating them into the leader’s “sense of self” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). In this way, standards are transformed into personal commitments such that the willingness to sacrifice in upholding them issues not as a response to externally imposed demands, but as an internally motivated expression of the leader’s self-identity (Shamir, 1991). This fundamental altering of the self—the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership—is central to how leaders resolve the normative struggle. This phenomenon is captured by the concept of identity-conferring *normative commitments*, which emerged as the focal construct in the agentic structure of leader character.

**Normative commitments.** The essence of commitment is the binding of a person to a target or a course of action (Meyer & Allen, 1997). In this case, the target is the practice of leadership and the course of action is to uphold the standards associated with it. The findings presented in Chapter 5 highlighted the importance leaders attach to commitment—to being “committed to the mission, to the platoon, and to your leadership.” In short, to be a leader in combat is to be committed to the standards that define what it means to be a leader in combat. By definition, commitments are not something leaders fail to uphold or abandon lightly. SSG K, for example, refused to abandon his commitment to lead from the front despite great fear and risk to his life. Therefore, a leader’s ability to resolve the normative struggle and uphold leadership standards under conditions of adversity, consistently over time, depends in large part on the strength of this commitment.

This commitment is normative in that it involves a strong sense of obligation leaders feel to uphold the standards of leadership. This strong normative orientation was characterized by three distinct features. First is a strong sense of urgency involving two reciprocal dynamics: a negative imperative in which there are certain actions that leaders “won’t do”; and a positive imperative in which there are certain actions that leaders feel they “must do.” Second is a deep motivational criterion that extends beyond mere behavioral compliance with standards. This motivational criterion generally demands that leaders subordinate self-interests to the interests of the mission and their soldiers. Third, this normative orientation demands that leaders minimize reliance on their formal hierarchical authority—i.e., leading from the “top”; and instead earn their leader status by sharing in the hardship and danger of combat with soldiers and doing so in a way that sets an example for them to follow—i.e., leading from the “front.”

Normative commitment from this perspective is viewed as the totality of internalized normative pressures to act in a way that upholds the standards of leadership (Wiener, 1982). It therefore involves a high degree of conformity with the standards of leadership and the values, principles and ideals embedded in them. This conformity, however, is not properly understood as “blind conformity” or merely doing what is expected based on socially imposed pressure or rewards. A leader who blindly conforms to role expectations and externally imposed obligations, who does what is expected of him or her out of fear of punishment or promise of reward, would not be recognized as being committed to the practice and standards of leadership.

By contrast, normative commitment in the sense intended here is an internally self-motivated phenomenon. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) is helpful in explaining the motivational dynamics involved in normative commitment. SDT is an approach to explaining the self-regulatory processes involved in self-motivation and personality development. It involves two core self-regulatory processes: internalization which refers to people's "taking in" a value or standard—understanding and accepting it as something that has a legitimate normative claim; and integration which refers to the further transformation of that standard into a personal standard so that subsequently, it will emanate from their "sense of self" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

Development of the self through SDT is theorized to be a motivated process. SDT identifies four types of self-motivation that reflect progressively higher levels of internalization and integration. First is *external regulation*, which refers to standards that have yet to be internalized. There is no commitment to uphold these standards but merely compliance motivated by consequences external to the leader, e.g., promise of reward or threat of punishment. Second is *introjected regulation*, which involves standards which are not fully accepted as one's own but are instead upheld to avoid guilt or anxiety or to attain ego enhancements such as pride. Third is *identified regulation*, which involves standards that are consciously valued and owned. Commitment to uphold these standards is motivated by a sense of their personal importance to the leader. Fourth is *integrated regulation*, which involves standards that are fully assimilated into the leader's self-understanding. Commitment to uphold these standards is motivated as an expression of the leader's self-identity. Normative commitments in the sense intended in

this study fall on the higher end of Ryan and Deci's motivational types – identified and integrated regulation.

*Identified regulation: Caring about the practice of leadership.* Normative commitments are grounded in a basic “caring about” the practice of leadership. The notion of “caring about” is based on the observation that leaders exhibit a conscientious concern about the quality of the leadership they practice beyond its instrumental effectiveness. This extends beyond simply being “here to pay off college” and involves having “passion” and even “love” “for what [a combat leader] does.” Further, this caring about the practice of leadership is not limited to compassion or empathy or benevolence directed towards soldiers—caring about “your soldiers and doing right by them,” caring “about the welfare of your soldiers,” even caring about your soldiers to the point of having “to love his soldiers.” It extends beyond these conventional notions of benevolence normally associated with leader character (Colquitt, Scott & LePine, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). It involves a more comprehensive and deeper concern with the practice of leadership itself: caring about “being an NCO, about your job, about what you’re doing—your mission” as well as caring about “your soldiers and doing right by them.”

This caring about the standards and practice of leadership reflects what Ryan and Deci (2000) term identified regulation. It reflects the self-importance leaders attach to the standards that define what it means to be a leader in combat. It emerges in and through leaders’ experience as they become socialized into the practice of leadership. For example, in the findings I described a Squad Leader who adopted the practice of

walking point on patrol as a way of (literally) leading from the front. In explaining this practice, the Squad Leader referred to an experience with a platoon sergeant he had on a previous combat deployment who “would always walk point” and this example was something that “stuck” with him. The Squad Leader described his practice of walking point as “old school NCO stuff”—meaning it is part of the tradition and custom of accepted practice of combat leadership. But based on this experience, he came to understand it as “important” not only for his soldiers to see him leading from the front in this way, but more significantly, he came to understand it as important to “*what being an NCO is all about.*”

Thus, leaders in and through their experience learn the importance of certain leadership practices; they in turn come to accept and value the standards by which the practice of leadership is governed and evaluated. The leader then is personally identified with the standards of leadership and takes personal responsibility for practicing in accordance with them. In this way, leaders become self-motivated to uphold standards simply because it is right and good to do so, because it would be wrong and bad practice to do otherwise.

Wallace (1996) calls such conduct “acting from respect for norms” (p. 99). He likens it to Kant’s concept of goodwill. Goodwill according to Kant reflects an individual’s deep understanding and appreciation of the mores of the community and expectations of a member related to those norms (Sherman, 1997; Wallace, 1996). Kant’s account of goodwill is grounded in the notion of respect. To respect something is to understand and appreciate its value, to regard it as important and worth taking



seriously, and to give it appropriate weight in influencing one's behavior (Darwall, 1977). A leader's caring about the practice of leadership involves a similar notion of goodwill that is grounded in a conscientious concern to respect in a similar way the standards that define "what being an NCO is all about."

***Integrated regulation: Identity-conferring commitment to the practice of leadership.*** Identified regulation motivated by a caring about the practice leadership is the gateway to the deeper integrated regulation motivated by identity-conferring commitment to the practice of leadership. At this level, leadership standards become fully assimilated into the leader's self-identity as a combat leader. The typical self-concept of the leader observed for this study reflects a jumble of identities: a leader, a soldier, a friend, a father, a husband, etc. All of these identities give rise to various commitments and obligations. Among these different identities, being and wanting to be a good leader is perhaps just one self-identity among these others and not necessarily any more important to a leader's self-understanding. For example, some of my informants describe being a leader as "just a job" much like any other job—it is a source of income, benefits and security for retirement. For these informants, their identity as a combat leader has no special significance or meaning beyond these instrumental concerns; it is just one among many identities that define their self-understanding.

For other leaders, however, being a combat leader has special meaning that is more central to their self-understanding. For these leaders, their motivation to uphold the standards of leadership has an "identity-conferring" quality. This identity-conferring quality reflects more deeply felt desires about the kind of leaders they aspire to be. This

desire to *be a certain kind of leader* is reflected in notions of an “ought self” representing the qualities a leader believes he should or ought to possess as well as an “ideal self” representing the qualities a leader aspires to possess (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, Troy, Klein, & Strauman, 1987). This desire to be a certain kind of leader manifests in the commitment to live by the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards of leadership. The motivation to uphold the standards of leadership then becomes an expression of the leader’s self-identity (Shamir, 1991).

In addition, identity-conferring normative commitments have strong moral overtones reflecting in the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards of leadership. These moral overtones implicate the moral aspects of a leader’s self-identity. Blasi’s (1995, 2005) concept of moral identity is organized around moral commitments similar to that described above. Moral commitments are not spontaneous impulses, like when someone decides they “feel like” having a hamburger for dinner. They are those moral concerns—values, principles, ideals—that are highly cherished and chosen as guides to live by. They represent deeply felt desires about the kind of person one aspires to be that have been reflected on and intentionally chosen. This choice amounts to a kind of personal pledge a person makes with oneself that obligates him to become a certain kind of person and live by certain values, principles, ideals. A leader achieves a moral identity to the extent that such moral commitments are central to his self-understanding. To the extent that these moral concerns are central to his self-understanding, they yield a self-identity characterized by a strong motivation to act consistent with these moral concerns to maintain the integrity of this identity (Blasi, 2005).

In summary, the concept of normative commitments analyzed above establishes the foundation for the agentic structure of leader character that explains the extraordinary performance demonstrated by leaders in combat—the willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity. Normative commitments are a motivational phenomenon that implicates the leader’s self-identity. They emerge from deep self-regulatory dynamics inherent in the leader’s inner struggle to come to terms with the normative demands of leadership. This deep self-regulation involves a fundamental altering of the self in which leadership standards are internalized and integrated into the leader’s self-understanding. In this way, leadership standards are transformed into personal and moral commitments such that the motivation to uphold them emanates not as response to externally imposed demands, but as an expression of the leader’s self-identity and his integrity.

This fundamental altering of the self—the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership—is central to how leaders resolve the normative struggle and ultimately explains the willingness to sacrifice. The willingness to sacrifice in upholding the standards of leadership is the most extreme expression of a leader’s normative commitment (Strauss, 1969). Such extreme personally destructive acts cannot be explained by external regulation or more instrumental or hedonistic approaches to motivation (Shamir, 1991); but only by the kind of identified and integrated regulation in which by risking his life, a leader makes a statement about his identity—about the kind of leader he is and the things he cares about most deeply. In short, standards internalized and integrated into identity-conferring normative commitments engage the leader’s

motivation more deeply and produce a stronger form of personal moral agency than do those that are externally regulated (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Characteristic motivations.** The analysis so far has explained the self-regulatory dynamics associated with normative commitments that produce the self-motivation—the identity and integrity—to uphold the standards of leadership and the willingness to sacrifice in doing so. However, these self-regulatory dynamics say nothing about the particular orientation or direction of the self-motivations that are given expression by the leader. To address this, in the findings in Chapter 3, I introduced the obligation to duty and aspiration to honor.

The obligation to duty and aspiration to honor represent two *characteristic motivations* exhibited by the leaders observed for this study. By characteristic motivation I refer to a leader's basic tendency to be moved or motivated to act for certain kinds of reasons. These reasons have to do with realizing a certain desired end or goal associated with the leader's identity-conferring normative commitment to uphold the standards of leadership (Zagzebski, 1998). A useful theoretical framework for understanding these characteristic motivations is provided by Higgins (1997, 1998) regulatory focus theory (RFT). RFT explains how people are motivated differently depending on the desired-end state. RFT proposes two distinct desired end-states: "strong oughts" representing beliefs about duties, obligations, and responsibilities; and "strong ideals" representing hopes, wishes and aspirations (Higgins, 1997, p. 1281).

The two desired end-states proposed by RFT correspond to the two characteristic motivations exhibited by the leaders observed for this study: RFT's "strong oughts"

corresponding to the obligation to duty; and RFT's "strong ideals" corresponding the aspiration to honor. These characteristic motivations emerge from the deep self-regulatory dynamics involved in the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership. They reflect the normative orientation towards leadership that results when leadership standards are transformed into personal identity-conferring normative commitments. In this section, I analyze the normative characteristics of each of these motivations, their relationships to each other and their significance to the agentic structure of leader character and his motivation to lead.

*Obligation to duty.* Obligation to duty emphasizes the duties, obligations and responsibilities associated with the standards of leadership. It is grounded in the recognition that leadership in combat is a grave responsibility—those entrusted with the responsibility literally hold the lives of their fellow soldiers in their hands. The obligation to duty thus reflects leaders' internalization of the normative obligations associated with standards of leadership. From an identified regulation perspective, the obligation to duty expresses the importance leaders attach to fulfilling the responsibilities associated with their role as leader. From an integrated regulation perspective, it is an expression of the leader's "ought self" (Higgins et al., 1987). As depicted in Figure 5.4, this motivation manifests in three distinct sets of duty-based motives or principled action patterns organized around the primary standards of leadership: demonstrating competence in completing missions, exhibiting loyalty in taking care of soldiers and taking responsibility for leading from the front.

The moral force of this felt sense of duty, obligation and responsibility provides the motivational foundation of the strong normative commitment to uphold standards. In terms of ethical theory, it reflects the categorical moral imperative—the “must”—of duty (Sherman, 1997). It is characterized by a sense of imperative and urgency; it commands leader’s attention and adherence. It is the normative orientation of the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments; it speaks to leader’s conscience in terms of “thou shalt not” *not* complete the mission and “thou shalt not” put yourself ahead of your soldiers (Fuller, 1969). This normative orientation is grounded in deeply shared beliefs about what is expected of someone in a leadership role in combat. It does not condemn leaders for failing to perform supererogatory deeds or achieve extraordinary results; instead, it holds them accountable or failing to abide their basic obligations and responsibilities as leaders.

However, the normative claims of the standards of leadership are not constrained to duty, obligation and responsibility. There is an attractive aspect to them—an aspirational quality that draws leaders in and inspires and motivates them to live up to the standards in their highest and not just their lowest form. This is the essence of the aspiration to honor.

***Aspiration to honor.*** The aspiration to honor is grounded in the recognition that leadership in combat is more than a responsibility; it is also an achievement—an earned and respected status. The aspiration to honor thus reflects the internalization of normative aspirations associated with the standards of leadership. From an identified regulation perspective, it expresses the self-importance leaders attach to proving their worthiness as a leader and earning the respect of those who matter most in combat—their

fellow “brothers in arms,” subordinates, peers, and superiors alike. From an integrated regulation perspective, it is an expression of a leader’s “ideal self” (Higgins et al., 1987). As depicted in Figure 5.5, this motivation manifests in three sets of honor motives or principled action patterns organized around the primary standards of leadership: taking pride in completing missions, exhibiting loyalty grounded in strong personal attachments to soldiers and earning respect by leading from the front.

This notion of honor as an aspirational motivation grounded in the leader’s desire to prove his worthiness and earn respect as a leader is highly salient amongst leaders in combat. As one Platoon Sergeant stated, “When [leaders] first come to the platoon, their biggest challenge is just proving themselves.” Associated with this motivation, there may be overtones of duty, obligation and responsibility, but these are usually muted. Instead it emphasizes ideas of honor, aspiration and achievement. In terms of ethical theory, it reflects the importance of virtue (Solomon, 1993). Virtue here is not meant in the truncated sense of moral prudishness or chasteness. Rather it is meant in the more expansive notion of willful and manful striving traditionally associated with martial virtue—the desire to realize to the fullest the ideals that constitute excellence in combat (Osiel, 1999). This normative orientation thus identifies and values those qualities that reflect a mastery and excellence in the practice of leadership.

***Motivation to lead.*** The characteristic motivations of duty and honor represent two distinct types of motivations that emerge from the deep self-regulatory dynamics involved in the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership. They reflect the normative orientation towards leadership that results when leadership standards are

transformed into personal identity-conferring normative commitments. This normative orientation towards leadership is similar in concept to what Chan and Drasgow (2001) described as social normative motivations to lead. Chan and Drasgow define motivation to lead (MTL) as an individual-differences construct that affects the decision of individuals aspiring to leadership roles; leaders' decisions to assume leadership training, roles, and responsibilities; their persistence as leaders; and the extent of their efforts to lead. They identified three related but distinct components underlying MTL: *affective* MTL in which individuals are motivated to lead because they like to lead others; *noncalculative* MTL in which individuals are not calculative in terms of costs, responsibilities, etc. in their motivation to lead; and *social normative* MTL in which individuals lead from a sense of duty or responsibility.

Obligation to duty is similar if not synonymous with social normative MTL. Aspiration to honor is less clear. On one hand, it is suggestive of affective MTL—leaders who have a desire to lead, see themselves as leaders and derive personal satisfaction from leading. But, as analyzed above, the aspiration to honor is also social normative—it reflects the normative aspirations associated with leadership in combat. The leader's affective MTL therefore—his aspiration to honor—is guided by norm-governed understandings about the aspirations that are appropriate for a leader. This highlights an important insight into the types of leader motivations inherent to the agentic structure of leader character that underpins extraordinary leader performance: they are social normative in orientation. This social normative orientation MTL is not limited to



duty, obligation and responsibility, but includes honor, aspiration and achievement as well.

*Motivational hierarchy.* Duty and honor are thus two distinct and different characteristic motivations underlying leaders' normative commitment to uphold the standards of leadership. However, although different, they are both social normative in that they are grounded in the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards of leadership. From this perspective, as the full range of motives and action patterns exhibited by leaders observed in this study is considered, one can conceptualize a kind of motivational continuum that begins at the bottom with the most basic duties of leadership in combat, and proceeds upwards and eventually to the highest aspirations of honor—e.g., the Medal of Honor awarded for “extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry... above and beyond the call of duty” (Fuller, 1969). A point somewhere along this scale marks the dividing line where the obligations of duty leave off and the aspirations to honor begin. Determining where duty motives leave off and where honor motives pick up is an empirical question that cannot be answered with precision; there is considerable overlap among these motives.

With this understanding and caveat, Figure 6.2 below attempts to parse between the motives that tend to align more closely with duty and those with honor. In completing the mission, for example, a distinction observed between a leader who is motivated by a sense of duty to know his job, exercise good judgment, and be decisive under duress; and a leader who takes pride in setting high standards, taking it to the enemy, making a difference, and leaving it on the table. Similarly, there is a motivational

distinction between the leader who out of a sense of duty, puts soldiers first, knows his soldiers, and keeps tabs on them; and a leader who, from a sense of deep personal attachment and loyalty to his soldiers—genuine care, even love—is committed to doing everything he can to bring everybody home, even at considerable personal sacrifice and risk to his life. Lastly, in leading from the front, a distinction can be discerned between a leader who is motivated by a sense of duty to take responsibility, step up, take ownership, and hold himself accountable; and a leader who is motivated by a sense of honor to earn the respect of his soldiers by setting an example, doing the hard right, and making personal sacrifices, even risking his life by putting it on the line.

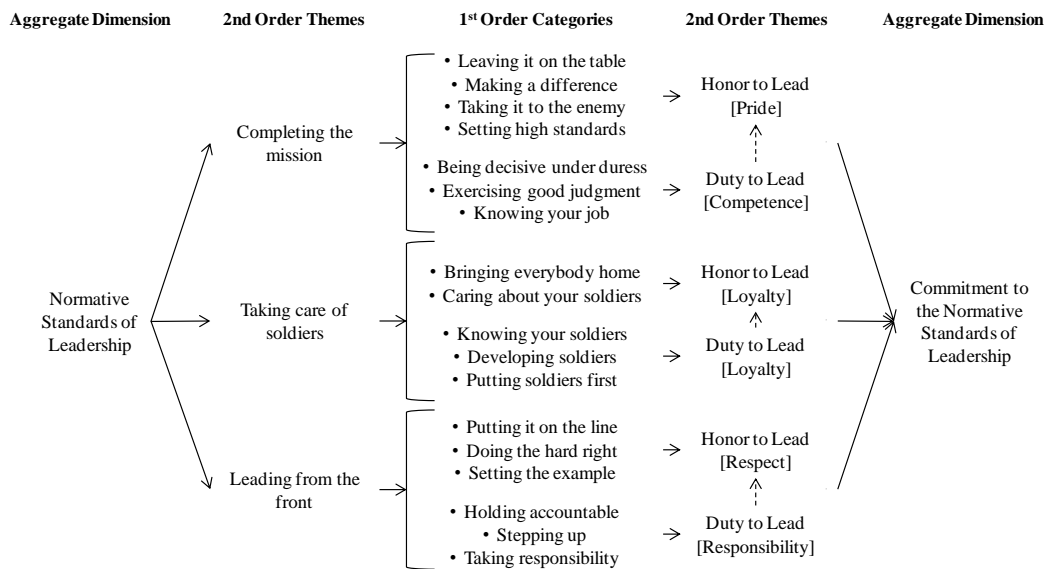


Figure 6.2. The motivational structure underpinning leaders' normative commitment.

The two characteristic motivations combined suggest that the motivational structure of leader character involves a normative hierarchy in which leaders are lashed

from below by baseline obligations of duty and also pulled from above by ideal aspirations to honor. That is, whereas the obligation to duty starts at the bottom of baseline normative obligations of leadership, the aspiration to honor starts at the top of highest normative aspirations of leadership. Understood this way, the two types of motivations are complementary: the obligations of duty constituting the normative floor and compelling leaders to fulfill their responsibilities; and the aspiration to honor constituting the normative ceiling and inspiring them to realize certain ideals and achieve a level of martial excellence.

**The normative question revisited.** To conclude, this first part of this analysis of key concepts and relationships associated with the agentic structure of leader character focused on the normative dimension of the leader's inner struggle. The normative struggle revolves around the fact that leadership in combat is a social practice governed by certain standards. These standards are highly normative in that they make strong demands on leaders, even that they should be willing to risk and sacrifice their lives. The normative commitments and characteristic motivations analyzed above explain why and how leaders are motivated to uphold these standards. The analysis involved self-regulatory dynamics important to the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership. These processes transform the standards of leadership into personal moral commitments such that the motivation to uphold them emanates not as a response to externally imposed demands, but as an expression of the leader's identity and integrity.

Embedded in this sense of identity and integrity is a distinct orientation to take certain social normative considerations—obligation to duty and aspiration to honor—

seriously as motivations to lead. The obligation to duty is about what a leader *owes*; it emphasizes the responsibilities associated with being a combat leader and expresses the importance leaders attach to fulfilling these normative obligations. The aspiration to honor, by contrast, is about what a leader *earns*; it emphasizes the ideals associated with being a combat leader and expresses the importance leaders attach to achieving these normative aspirations. Together, duty and honor form a motivational hierarchy that underpins their commitment to uphold the standards of leadership: duty reflecting baseline leader obligations—the normative “floor”; and honor reflecting ideal leader aspirations—the normative “ceiling.”

Overall, the normative orientation embedded in normative commitments and characteristic motivations entails a deferential regard for something bigger than the leader himself. It involves strong evaluations of right or wrong, better or worse, good and bad, which are not based on any individual leader’s own personal preferences; but rather reflect the guiding values, principles and ideals of the community of combat leaders embedded in the standards of leadership (Taylor, 1989). These guiding beliefs imply relations of duty and honor, of obligation and aspiration, not calculations of convenience or personal preference; they demand that primary attention be given to what is appropriate and necessary rather than what is personally expedient. A leader who has acquired this normative orientation is motivated by a central fact: that there is something important beyond the leader himself and his immediate self-interest that is worthy of his deep felt commitment and sacrifice.

From this perspective, in approaching hard situations in which leadership demands a willingness to risk and even sacrifice their life, like those faced by SSG K, the question is not, “How can I avoid low crawling up the hill?” It is the morally laden questions that ask, “What is expected of me as a leader in this situation? Where does my duty lay?” and “Given that I care about my moral worthiness as a leader, what should I be motivated to do? What in this situation is worthy of being a leader and the respect of my brothers in arms?” The overarching normative orientation implicit in these questions reflects a sense of having been entrusted with something—the duty and honor of leading soldiers in combat; that duty and honor is a larger cause of inherent worth to a leader who “cares”; and that it is the leader’s conscientious concern to uphold this cause for its own sake, over the course of the combat deployment in such a way as to live up to the standards of leadership without corrupting the values, principles and ideals embedded in them. In short, the commitment and motivation of combat leaders reflects a strong sense of trusteeship (Hecl, 2008): combat leaders are those who in and through their identity-conferring normative commitment and characteristic motivations of duty and honor are members of a moral community entrusted with upholding the standards of leadership. This is the deep motivational structure of leader character that explains the willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards in the face of adversity.

### **The Volitional Struggle: Externalization of Standards of Leadership**

In this second part of this analysis of key concepts and relationships associated with the agentic structure of leader character, I shift my focus to the volitional dimension of the leader’s inner struggle. In contrast to the normative struggle which is the problem

of internalization of standards, the volitional struggle concerns the externalization of standards; that is, it concerns how standards, once internalized as normative commitments and characteristic motivations of duty and honor, are then sustained in the face of adversity consistently over time with reliable success in doing so. I begin with a brief analysis of the adversity of combat followed by an examination of the dialectics associated with the volitional struggle. I then explain the volitional disciplines that enable the leader to sustain his commitment and motivation to uphold leadership standards in the face of adversity.

**Adversity of combat.** Combat is an environment characterized by permanent and pervasive adversity. Adversity consists of the inexorable forces that stand in the way of efforts to complete missions and tasks, take care of soldiers and otherwise make leading in combat dangerous and difficult. In the findings presented in Chapter 3, I discussed two dimensions of adversity which I labeled the trauma and tedium of combat.

The trauma of combat consists of those forms of adversity that involve significant emotional stress that impacts my informants on a deep psychological level. The prototypical forms of traumatic adversity are associated with firefights, such as the intense fear that SSG K described in the introduction to this study as well as significant emotional stress, such as suffering the loss of a close friend. The trauma of combat also includes the latent effects of dealing with the constant fear and anxiety from being in an environment of constant risk and danger, as well as frustrations associated with the unique demands of the counterinsurgency in which my informants were engaged.

By contrast, the tedium of combat involves adversity less often associated with combat. It involves things such as enduring the monotony of routine tasks and missions, coping with the physical and mental fatigue of difficult missions and chronic strain of a high-operational tempo, dealing with the hardship of austere living conditions as well as suffering “personal drama” of being separated from family and friends and “missing life” back home. These forms of adversity act against leaders like a kind of chronic friction that makes the day-in-day-out living and working in combat difficult.

The tedium of combat comprises most of the adversity experienced by my informants—“95 percent” by one informant’s estimation. On the other hand, though the trauma of combat comprises just the other “5 percent” of adversity, it exerts a disproportionately negative impact. This is because it involves significant emotional and moral stress, both acute and chronic, that tends to impact my informants on a deep psychological level that is aggravated by the ambiguities and frustrations unique to counterinsurgency.

Nonetheless, in both its traumatic and tedious manifestations, adversity has a corrosive effect on leaders’ commitment and motivation to uphold the standards of leadership. Arguably more than any other human activity, continuous combat operations against a dangerous and elusive enemy in a harsh and alien environment over the course of a 12-month deployment takes a toll, severely straining the physical, mental, and moral capacities of leaders and soldiers alike. Under these conditions, besieged by the corrosive and cumulative effects of adversity, sustaining the commitment and motivation

to uphold the standards of leadership becomes a significant challenge for leaders. This challenge is the root of the volitional struggle.

**The volitional struggle.** Volition refers to the conscious choice and effortful control of action; it is to do something by one's own resources and sustained efforts, independent of countervailing forces or pressures arising either externally from the adversity in the environment or internally from temptation or impulse (Corno, 1993). Colloquially, volition is associated with *strength of will* or *willpower*, both expressions suggesting a continuum with *weakness of will* or *lack of willpower* as its opposite (Corno, 1993). The negative end of this continuum is a longstanding concern for research on character and human agency (cf., Baer, Kaufman, & Baumeister, 2008). The classical Greek philosophers (e.g., Plato, Aristotle) called it *akrasia*—weakness of will or lacking command or control over oneself (Sherman, 1989). Saint Paul famously described the problem as “weakness of the flesh”: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:15). Contemporary moral psychology describes the problem as the “judgment-action gap” or “thought/action” gap (Bergman, 2004, p. 22).

Central to all these expressions is the problem of self-control—of controlling one's behavioral responses to situations involving temptations, obstacles, adversity, etc. Specifically, self-control refers to the effortful restraint of base impulses and bringing behavior in line with normative standards, i.e., values, principles, ideals (Baumeister, et al., 2009). The problem of self-control is central to the volitional struggle. It involves



the leader's struggle to restrain the impulse to yield to adversity and make his make effective in action his commitment to uphold the standards of leadership.

Inherent in the volitional struggle are mixed-motives involving a conflict between what my informants describe as the "hard right" and the "easy wrong." On one hand, the obligation to duty and aspiration to honor motivate leaders to act in a way that upholds standards of leadership – the hard right. On the other hand, fear, fatigue and frustration, etc. evoke a countervailing impulse to act in a way that yields the adversity of combat—the easy wrong. For example, recall again situation involving SSG K in an ambush. I described this previously as a prototypical hard situation in which the adversity of combat and the standards of leadership conflict to demand difficult things of leaders. In facing this situation, SSG K acknowledged feeling acute fear. This fear certainly manifested in an impulse to "hunker down" to protect himself from the enemy fire as the rest of us did. Yet, SSG K was able to control this fear, restrain the impulse to hunker down and, at great risk to his life, low crawl up the hill under fire. SSG K explained his action by reference to his commitment to "lead from the front." Thus, in this case, SSG K was successful in exercising the self-control to restrain the impulse to act on his fear and instead make effective in action his commitment to uphold the standards of leadership. In short, he was successful in "doing the hard right over the easy wrong."

The situation faced by SSG K illustrates an acute manifestation of the volitional struggle to resist adversity and uphold standards. More often, however, volitional struggles manifest in more mundane forms. For example, before missions, leaders will cut their sleep short so they can get themselves ready before their soldiers. This allows

them to focus on supervising their soldiers and making sure they are “mission ready” when they get up. However, sleep in combat is precious. Leaders and soldiers labor through combat in a continuous state of sleep deprivation. So working against the leader getting up early before mission is the temptation to sleep longer—to stay “in the rack” and get an extra 15, 30, or 60 minutes of needed sleep. Similarly, after mission, when everyone is exhausted and just wants to get some food and go back to sleep, they must first clean all weapons and gear and make sure everything is mission ready again. These are two routine manifestations of the leader’s volitional struggle. They share the same mixed-motive dialectical structure as SSG K’s acute situation. Whereas the acute situations such as SSG K’s tend to be intense but infrequent, the mundane situations are less intense but pervasive.

Almost everything a leader does from the routine and mundane to the difficult and intense is done in the face of some adversity that must be resisted and overcome. This fact highlights the continuous nature of the volitional struggle: it concerns not just the struggle to restrain impulse and resist adversity in a particular situation; it also involves a temporal dimension that engages leaders in a continuous struggle to restrain impulse and resist adversity across an ongoing stream of action over time. It is this continuous nature of the volitional struggle that accounts for its corrosive effect on leaders’ motivation that undermines their ability to sustain their commitment to uphold the standards of leadership. To grasp the significance of the continuous and corrosive effects of adversity, consider the following hypothetical but representative example:

You are a squad leader half way through a 12-month deployment and 5 days in to a 10-day mission cycle involving daily

combat patrols. After 6 months of continuous patrolling, you have lost 20 pounds. You feel physically weak and chronically tired. You suffer persistent lower back pain from the heavy combat load you carry. Mentally, you are distracted and stressed. You are missing your son's first birthday and your wife is struggling with the finances. The enemy threat has intensified and one of your soldiers was killed in a recent firefight. You are not sure if you will make it home to see your son's second birthday.

As you step off on patrol in the dark morning hours, you carry extra equipment because your squad is short-handed. It aggravates the pain in your lower back. You walk point because navigating in the dark with night vision goggles is difficult and you have to lead from the front. As daylight breaks, it gets hot, reaching 110 degrees by mid-morning. After a long and strenuous foot movement over rugged mountainous terrain, you occupy an overwatch position to provide security for the rest of the platoon as it conducts a KLE in a village. You are frustrated because the enemy that killed your soldier also destroyed a playground that your unit spent the last several months building for this village. Your sacrifices and those of your soldiers do not seem to make a difference. The mission drags on. You "bake" in the hot sun. You are hungry and dehydrated; you fight the urge to sleep and try to stay alert.

When the time finally comes to return to base, you take a different route to avoid ambush from the enemy. The route is longer and more difficult. Your legs burn and body aches from the strenuous movement back across mountainous terrain. Anxiety joins your fatigue because now is when you are likely to be ambushed. You finally reach the COP 16 hours after the patrol began. You want to shower, eat and sleep. But there are no showers or hot water and before you can eat and rest, you must debrief with the platoon leadership, plan the next day's patrol, clean your weapons and gear and make sure your soldiers do the same. Tomorrow is another patrol and more of the same; and more of the same after that for six more months. It feels like there no end in sight.

The scenario above highlights the continuous nature of the volitional struggle.

Throughout each phase of the patrol—before, during and after—the leader faces diverse forms of adversity, e.g., anxiety, fear, fatigue, frustration. From this perspective, it is one thing to resist and overcome adversity in a particular situation, such as when SSG K overcame his fear to low crawl up a hill under fire; but it is quite another thing to resist

and overcome adversity continuously over the course of a 16-hour patrol, a 10-day mission cycle and 12-month deployment. This underscores that fact that the volitional struggle involves a temporal dimension in which the leader is continuously engaged in resisting and overcoming adversity. It is this temporal dimension of the volitional struggle—its continuous and active nature—that has a corrosive effect on leader’s motivation. This corrosive effect creates a gap between a leader’s commitment to uphold the standards of leadership and his ability to make that commitment effective in action, consistently in the face of continuous adversity. Bridging this commitment-action gap requires what I term *volitional discipline*.

**Volitional discipline.** A leader’s commitment to uphold the standards of leadership is not made effective in one instant or situation; sustained self-control exercised consistently over a period of time in the face of continuous adversity is required. This capacity for sustained self-control I refer to as volitional discipline. Sustained self-control is “volitional” in that it involves the personal resources that enable the deliberate, conscious and effortful control of action. It involves “discipline” because it entails mental and behavioral self-regulatory practices that correct and compensate for deficiencies in motivation resulting from the corrosive effects of adversity. If leaders in combat did not suffer from the corrosive effects of adversity, there would little need for volitional disciplines. However, as discussed above, leaders do suffer both in situ as well as chronic deficiencies in their motivation that diminish their agentic capacity to restrain impulse, resist adversity and uphold standards. Volitional disciplines counteract these deficiencies. They enable the leader to bridge the gap between his commitment to uphold

the standards of leadership and his ability to make that commitment effective in action, consistently over time in the face of continuous adversity.

*Practical and moral volitional disciplines.* The findings presented in Chapter 3 highlighted two categories of volitional disciplines—practical and moral. These disciplines correspond with the two forms of adversity in combat—the tedium and trauma respectively. Practical disciplines enable leaders to resist and overcome the tedium of combat—the monotony, burnout, austerity and personal hardship of combat. They involve behavior-oriented self-regulatory practices aimed at fighting complacency, achieving tactical mastery and balancing work and rest. Moral disciplines enable the leader to resist and overcome the trauma of combat—the significant emotional events associated with the loss, fear and frustration of combat. They involve cognitively-oriented self-regulatory practices that enable leaders to maintain a sense of mission, such as trusting higher and focusing on tasks at hand. They also involve emotionally-oriented self-regulatory practices that enable leaders to control frustration, maintain positive relationships and exercise tactical restraint. Figure 6.3 below depicts how moral and practical discipline corresponds with the adversity of combat—the trauma and the tedium respectively.

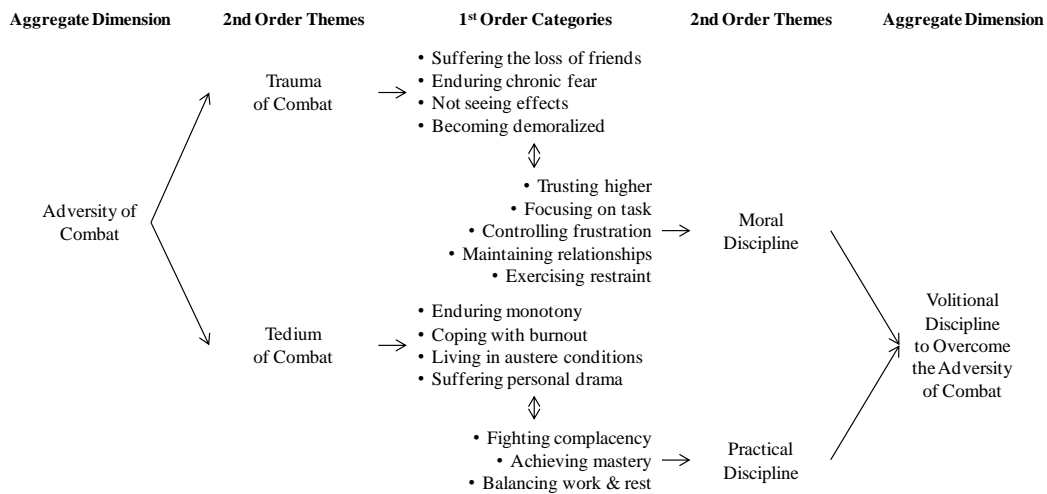


Figure 6.3. The volitional disciplines to overcome the adversity of combat.

As stated above, the self-regulatory practices associated the practical and moral disciplines counteract the adversity of combat by correcting and compensating for leaders deficiencies in motivation. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) is useful here again for understanding the relationship between these volitional disciplines and leaders’ motivation to uphold standards. RFT proposes that the focus of self-regulation differs in relation to strong oughts (obligation to duty) versus strong ideals (aspiration to honor): ought self-regulation involves a “prevention focus” that entails sensitivity to avoiding negative outcomes (Higgins, 1997, p. 1281). The focus is to be prudent, precautionary and vigilant in avoiding wrongdoing, mistakes, omissions related to the desired end-state—fulfilling duties, obligations and responsibilities. Ideal self-regulation by contrast, involves a “promotion focus” that entails sensitivity to achieving positive outcomes (Higgins, 1997, p. 1281). The focus is advancement, growth and mastery related to the desired end-state—achieving virtue, aspirations and excellence. Hence, RFT

distinguishes between different kinds of self-regulation in relation to desired-end states: a promotion focus oriented towards aspirations and a prevention focus oriented towards obligations. This framework is helpful to understanding the different regulatory focus embedded in the practical and moral disciplines and their relationship to leaders' characteristic motivations.

*Practical discipline regulatory focus.* Consistent with RFT, my findings suggest both prevention and promotion regulatory focuses associated with practical disciplines. The prevention focus of practical discipline emphasizes fighting complacency. It involves vigilant attention to everyday tasks—"doing the little things right"—and being prudent and precautionary—"never assuming," "always checking" and "maintaining accountability." The promotion focus of practical discipline emphasizes achieving mastery over the tactical environment. It involves building physical endurance and mastering infantry basics and emphasizes "always getting better" and "always improving."

In practice, it is difficult to separate the practical disciplines associated with obligation to duty and those associated with aspiration to honor. As discussed in the previous section, in the ongoing, continuous practice of leadership, any particular situation may involve a number of different motivations and enabling self-regulatory practices. The distinctions I am making here are logical and conceptual although in practice they are often intertwined. Generally though, a distinction can be detected in which certain practical disciplines have more of a prevention focus – e.g., "always

checking” to minimize mistakes; while certain others have more a promotion focus – “always improving” to maximize proficiency and competence.

My findings, however, also suggested a possible third regulatory focus dimension that involves maintaining balance between promotion and prevention regulatory focus to avoid burnout. This balanced regulatory focus recognizes that too much discipline—prevention or promotion focused—can be as problematic as too little. The desired-end state in this case is to achieve the right self-regulatory balance that helps leaders sustain their motivation and capacity for self-control over the course of the 12-month deployment.

*Moral discipline regulatory focus.* Like practical discipline, moral discipline involves both prevention and promotion self-regulatory focuses. However, the prevention and promotion focus is less obvious due to the inherent depth of the concept. Moral discipline is similar to a philosophical concept important to character called “moral depth” (Kekes, 1995, p. 160). Moral depth refers to the “deep structure” level of volitional disciplines—the level of core values, beliefs, and principles (Lord & Hall, 2005, p. 602). The depth associated with moral discipline involves self-regulatory practices that operate beneath surface-level, behavior-oriented practical disciplines. In this respect, moral disciplines underpin the practical disciplines. Consequently, the self-regulatory focus is more subtle and nuanced.

The prevention focus of moral discipline involves avoiding forming inappropriate attitudes in response to the hard realities of combat. In suffering the loss of close friends and not seeing the effects of missions, a leader may become morally disengaged—such as



resignation and despair on the one hand, or anger and vengefulness on the other (Bandura, 1999; Kekes, 1995). Prevention focused moral disciplines involve practices around controlling frustrations, e.g., not “wearing emotions on your sleeve” and “not losing your professional bearing.” These are aimed at not allowing feelings to get out of hand when faced with the reality of having to continually risk your life and suffer the loss of close friends and soldiers you love. Additionally, prevention focus includes exercising tactical restraint in hard situations when there is a strong impulse to “cut loose” and “take your frustrations out” on non-combatants. The essence of this prevention focus is to maintain a balanced emotional response that tilts neither toward undue pessimism nor unrestrained anger in the face of traumatic adversity of combat.

The promotion focus of moral discipline involves the self-regulatory practices aimed at making best efforts to fulfill the obligations of duty and aspirations of honor, while at the same time, understanding that in the face of the hard realities of combat, these efforts may be unavailing. This is a slightly tempered promotion focus that is grounded in an acceptance of the hard realities and traumatic adversity of combat. Yet a promotion focus emerges through moral disciplines that promote an undiminished commitment to exercise as much control and influence over circumstances as possible. These practices include trusting the “big picture” to “higher” and “focusing on the task at hand” where leaders can exercise control and influence over circumstances.

The essence of this promotion focus is to maintain a positive motivational disposition similar in orientation to positive psychological capital (PsyCap; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). PsyCap represents certain motivational propensities

that accrue through positive psychological constructs such as efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience. It is a positive psychological state that represents one's positive appraisal of the particular situation, the physical and personal resources available, and the probability of being successful based on personal effort, upward striving and perseverance (Luthans et al., 2007). The promotion focus of moral discipline shares a similar end-state as PsyCap in terms of achieving a positive motivational disposition. The difference is that moral disciplines emphasize underlying moral and mental practices that promote that positive end-state. From this perspective, moral disciplines can be understood as the self-regulatory practices that underpin the emergence of positive psychological capital.

In sum, these self-regulatory practices reflect the dual inhibitive and proactive nature of personal moral agency in that it involves the prevention-focused self-control to resist and overcome the adversity of combat as well as the promotion-focused self-control to uphold and affirm standards of leadership (Bandura, 2008). It is important to note, however, that from an agentic perspective, these self-regulatory practices are not a "para-mechanical" in the sense that action is determined by the power or strength of certain innate drives, tendencies or traits (Wren, 1991, p. 50); they are not the automatic functioning of innate psychic forces, e.g., drives (push forces) or expectancies (pull forces) or approach-avoidance tendencies. Nor do they reflect the mechanical functioning of homeostatic self-regulating systems, e.g., the thermostat model of self-control. Rather, these self-regulatory practices are "para-political" in the sense that they involve conscious choice that gives privileged status or authority (as in a political system)

to certain motives for action (duty/honor) over others (impulses) (Wren, 1991, p. 50). This privileged status is result of the leader's volition – his will to subordinate and restrain lower order impulses and elevate and affirm higher order commitments. This will has the effect of restructuring the various mixed-motives in a way that gives authority or priority or importance to normative obligations and aspirations over impulses.

**Volitional autonomy and integrity.** To conclude, this second part of this analysis of key concepts and relationships associated with the agentic structure of leader character focused on the volitional dimension of the leader's inner struggle. The volitional struggle revolves around the fact that in combat, leaders are besieged by permanent and pervasive adversity. This adversity has a corrosive effect on leaders' commitment and motivation to uphold the standards of leadership. The volitional disciplines analyzed above explain how leaders sustain the self-control to restrain the impulse to yield to adversity and keep performance in line with standards.

Volitional disciplines involve self-regulatory practices that correspond to and counteract the corrosive effects of adversity—moral discipline to counteract the effects of the trauma of combat and practical discipline to counteract the effects of the tedium of combat. These volitional disciplines involve both positive (promotion focus) and negative (prevention focus) self-regulatory practices. By practicing both promotion and prevention, a leader not only corrects and compensates for deficiencies in motivation to uphold the standards of leadership, but he also builds up greater volitional “muscle” to restrain the impulse to yield to fear, fatigue and frustration in the first place (Baumeister,

Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). That is, he develops a kind of self-regulatory strength to combat the corrosive effects of adversity.

This strength reflects a strong form of volition termed autonomy. Volitional autonomy is the capacity to direct one's own decisions and actions under adversity in accordance with internalized standards. It involves the capacity to freely make choices about what to do (i.e., to not have choices governed by impulse) and the self-control to do what one has freely chosen. "Freely" here does not imply that the leader is *free* of restraint, responsibility, or obligation. Rather, it reflects the *bounded autonomy* of a leader who has deeply internalized certain standards and cultivated the volitional discipline to govern his actions accordingly (Folger, 1998). The essence of this volitional autonomy is that its source is internal to the leader: it is a pre-established feature of his will and his capacity for self-control. The defining characteristic of this autonomous will is integrity.

Integrity is strongly associated with the volitional aspects of leader character. Some identify integrity as the root construct in leader character (e.g., Kaiser & Hogan, 2010). Integrity is understood in disparate ways. The etymological meaning of the word implies wholeness or intactness (Blasi, 2005). In the present volitional context, integrity refers to a leader's serious concern for the consistency of his actions with his chosen commitments. Two aspects of integrity are important to the volitional autonomy: integrity of responsibility and integrity of pride.

***Integrity of responsibility.*** Integrity of responsibility refers to a special relation a person has with oneself as having appropriated norms and relations and the roles and

duties deriving from them (Blasi, 2005). Integrity of responsibility refers to the will to make oneself responsible for upholding those norms and relations associated with one's role. To make oneself responsible is to operate on the self; it means to constrain the self and create a kind of necessity or imperative for oneself in relation to certain norms and actions (Wren, 2010). This necessity reflects the strong sense of urgency described above as involving two reciprocal dynamics: a negative imperative in which there are certain actions that leaders "won't do"; and a positive imperative in which there are certain actions that leaders feel they "must do." In action, this necessity is expressed through volitional discipline and sustained self-control, resistance to temptation, effort and determination with an emphasis on the prevention focused self-regulatory practices. A closely related aspect of this integrity of responsibility is accountability – the sense of necessarily owning the actions one performed and the consequences of one's actions (Blasi, 2005). This sense of responsibility and accountability is the foundation for the sense of integrity characteristic of volitional autonomy.

*Integrity of pride.* By contrast, the integrity of pride refers to a special disposition concerning the self and others with whom the self is closely identified (Smith, 1998). It is based on positive appraisal and the self-respect it generates: To have pride is to be pleased or satisfied with oneself in some respect. Verbally, pride is expressed as joy and triumph. Pride, however, differs from joy in that the sources of pride are things for which the person is responsible. This links pride with responsibility—the integrity associated with pride follows from responsibility. This linkage is central to the sense of integrity that emerges from pride: you can only take pride in what is, in some sense yours. And it

is this “possessive” aspect of pride from which the sense of integrity derives. The integrity associated with pride thus reflects justified self-satisfaction based on genuine and demonstrated merit (Smith, 1998).

However, the integrity of pride is not simply a backward gaze or savoring of past glories; it is not merely a feeling of satisfaction with one’s accomplishments (Smith, 1998). The integrity of pride involves a strong will to realize high standards, especially those that go above and beyond the minimum standards, and to strive to become ever-better in attaining them. In action, it compels a leader to continue to forge forward, invoking an upward-striving dimension the ongoing, practiced commitment to proper standards. Integral this is the willingness to submit to the demands of hard work and endure the stress, disappointments, and failures that inevitably accompany achievement striving. Thus, whereas the integrity of responsibility manifests in a strong prevention regulatory focus concerned with resisting temptation and maintaining standards, the integrity of pride entails a strong promotion regulatory focus concerned with not simply adhering to standards more consistently, but to push the standards themselves to higher thresholds (Smith, 1998).

In sum, the volitional autonomy reflects a strong form of volition characterized by the capacity for sustained self-control to govern one’s actions consistent with normative commitments and a strong sense of integrity grounded in a sense of responsibility and pride. This volitional autonomy is cultivated through self-regulatory practices associated with practical and moral disciplines that correct and compensate for deficiencies in motivation resulting from the corrosive effects of adversity. They serve as what Puka

(2004) described as the self's "manager and disciplinarian," the "overseer, coach or personal trainer, whipping us into shape and keeping us that way" (p. 162). Together, volitional disciplines and the accompanying sense of integrity produce the volitional "strength" that enables the leader to bridge the gap between his commitment to uphold the standards of leadership and his ability to make that commitment effective in action, consistently over time in the face of continuous adversity.

### **Answering the Research Questions**

To bolster the theoretical discussion above, this section focuses on how the data and emergent concept of leader character help answer the guiding research questions delineated in Chapter 3. Explicitly discussing the relationship between the emergent data and the research questions provides both a summary of the study's contributions and insight into areas where future research should concentrate. To this end, three overarching themes run through this study that frames the answers to these questions.

First, extraordinary leader performance is characterized in the literature by the leader's willingness to transcend self-interests and sacrifice to achieve the mission and collective good of his or her work unit, organization, community or entire society (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). In the context of this study, extraordinary leader performance was characterized specifically as the leader's willingness to sacrifice in upholding the standards of leadership in the face of adversity. This performance I describe as a strong form of personal moral agency. I describe it as *agency* because it involves the leader bringing influence to bear on himself—on his own functioning, on environmental events as well as on others (Bandura, 1986). It is a form of *personal* and *moral* agency because

this influence is exercised individually by the leader and directed towards upholding normative standards of leadership (Bandura, 1986; Brown, et al., 2005). And it is a *strong* form of agency because this influence is exercised in the face of countervailing adversity—the tedium and trauma of combat—and even at risk of life.

Second, extraordinary leader performance involves an inherent dichotomy between the leader’s commitment to certain overriding, common good-oriented end-values on the one hand, and the claims of a variety of lesser everyday wants, needs and interests on the other (Burns, 1978). In the context of this study, this inherent dichotomy was framed as a dialectical tension between the standards of leadership and the adversity of combat (see Figure 6.1 above). In dialectical models, conflicts emerge between entities espousing opposing thesis and antithesis. The conflict between the thesis and antithesis is in turn influenced by a third factor that results in an emergent synthesis (van de Ven, 1992; van de Ven & Poole, 1995). In Figure 6.1, the thesis is represented by the *standards of leadership* that make strong normative claims on leaders; these represent a positive social influence that leaders must uphold. The antithesis is represented by the *adversity of combat*, which stands in the way of leaders upholding standards; adversity represents a negative environmental influence that leaders must resist. The adversity of combat and the standards of leadership thus constitute strong opposing forces acting on the leader.

Third, inherent in this dichotomy is the leader’s inner struggle to transcend the plethora of competing claims of lesser everyday wants and needs and serve good ends and high purposes directed towards the common good (Burns, 1978). In the context of



this study, this involves the leader's struggle to bring influence to bear in such a way that he successfully resists the adversity combat and upholds the standards of leadership. This inner struggle involves two dimensions: the normative struggle which concerns the internalization of character, i.e., how leaders internalize and integrate the standards of leadership into their sense of self and identity; and the volitional struggle which concerns the externalization of character, i.e., how leaders enact and sustain the standards of leadership in and through the adversity of combat. The normative and volitional struggles capture the inner dialectics at the center of the agentic structure of leader character emergent in this study.

These dialectics and the leader's struggle to resolve them constitute what Burns (1978) described as the great bulk of day-to-day leadership activity and the ultimate test of extraordinary leader performance. They are therefore ground zero for understanding the significance of leader character and extraordinary leader performance. How character enables leader's to resolve this dichotomy is the focus of the guiding research question to this study: *How does leader character explain extraordinary leader performance?*

Before I address this guiding research question, I first present the answers to the secondary research questions concerning the internalization and externalization of leader character. With this foundation, I then turn to the guiding research question for this study and address the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance. I conclude with the final research question addressing the root construct—agency—associated with the concept of leader character emergent in this study.

**Internalization of character.** The internalization of character refers to the psychological structures and processes important to the formation of leader character. That is, it concerns how character impacts *who a leader is*—the leader’s sense of self and identity and including the social context in which the leader is embedded. As indicated in my literature review, the normative dimension of character suggests that leader character is socially constituted around “social traits” or virtues that reflect the values, principles and ideals of the culture/community in which the leader is embedded. For leader socialization to be effective in producing character capable of extraordinary leader performance, my literature review suggested that two factors are most important. First, these social traits or virtues must be internalized into the leader’s sense of self and identity (Gecas, 1986). Second, this internalization must involve some kind of self-motivation if the leader is not to be “oversocialized” in the sense of just being a passive sponge of social influences and product of external forces (Gecas, 1986, p. 133). My literature review noted that a key limitation of prevailing trait-based approaches to leader character is that they rely on abstract concepts of virtues and tend to neglect how these virtues are internalized and integrated into the leader’s sense of self and identity. Thus, understanding how these social traits are internalized into the leader’s self-identity is important to understanding leader character. How this self-motivated internalization occurs is the focus of Research Question 2A: *How are “social traits” internalized into the leader’s sense of self and identity?*

**Standards of leadership.** The first finding important to the concept of leader character emergent in this study is that the social reference point for the internalization of

character is not “social traits” or virtues per se, but the standards associated with the practice of leadership. Leadership is commonly understood as a social process. However, leading in combat is more than a social process, it is a *social practice*. The key distinction is that as a social practice, it is governed by certain normative standards that define what it means to be a combat leader, including notions of conduct that gain a leader merit praise, or honor as well as conduct that are regarded as bad, wrong or intolerable (MacIntyre, 2007). Embedded in these standards are the guiding beliefs—values, principles and ideals—that characterize this community of infantry combat leaders. These standards are thus highly normative in that they make strong claims on leaders: They carry moral significance; they are authoritative; and they obligate leaders to certain courses of action, e.g., completing the mission, taking care of soldiers, and leading from the front. These standards therefore serve as a kind of reference point—a set of normative criteria—around which the character of the leader is formed and evaluated (Bandura, 2008; Higgins, 1990). The concept of leader character emergent in this study thus begins with the standards that govern the practice of leadership that provide the normative grounding upon which the character of the leader is shaped, formed and evaluated. These standards are in turn internalized by the leader in the form of normative commitments. This is the second finding important to the concept of leader character emergent in this study.

***Normative commitment.*** The essence of commitment is the binding of a person to a target or a course of action (Meyer & Allen, 1997). In this case, the target is the practice of leadership and the course of action is to uphold the standards associated with

it. Normative commitment from this perspective is viewed as the totality of internalized normative pressures to act in a way that upholds the standards of leadership (Wiener, 1982). It therefore involves a high degree of conformity with the standards of leadership and the values, principles and ideals embedded in them. This conformity, however, is not properly understood as “blind conformity” or merely doing what is expected based on socially imposed pressure or rewards. As indicated in the literature review, internalization must involve some kind of self-motivation if the leader is not to be “oversocialized” in the sense of just being a passive sponge of social influences and product of external forces (Gecas, 1986, p. 133). From this perspective, normative commitment in the sense intended here is an internally self-motivated phenomenon reflecting the identified and integrated regulation associated with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT).

*Identified regulation.* Normative commitments are grounded in a basic “caring about” the practice of leadership reflecting Ryan and Deci’s identified regulation. Caring about reflects the self-importance leaders attach to the standards that define what it means to be a leader in combat. It emerges in and through experience as leaders become socialized into the practice and standards of leadership. This process has a strong social learning theory emphasis (Bandura, 1986). Through their experience, leaders learn the importance of certain leadership practices; they in turn come to accept and value the standards by which the practice of leadership is governed and evaluated. The leader then is personally identified with the standards of leadership and takes personal responsibility for practicing in accordance with them. In this way, leaders become self-motivated to

uphold standards simply because it is right and good to do so, because it would be wrong and bad practice to do otherwise. Wallace (1996) calls such conduct “acting from respect for norms” (p. 99). Acting from respect for norms entails a goodwill grounded a deep appreciation and respect for the practice of leadership—i.e., caring about—and a reciprocal conscientious concern to abide by the standards that govern its practice.

*Integrated regulation.* Identified regulation motivated by a caring about the practice leadership is the gateway to the deeper integrated regulation motivated by identity-conferring commitment to the practice of leadership. At this deeper level, leadership standards become fully assimilated into the leader’s self-identity as a combat leader. This identity-conferring quality reflects more deeply felt desires about the kind of leaders they aspire to be. This desire to be a certain kind of leader manifests in the commitment to live by the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards of leadership. Such commitments yield a leader self-identity characterized by a strong self-consistency motivation to uphold the standards of leadership. Enacting the commitment to uphold the standards of leadership then becomes an expression of the leader’s identity and integrity (Shamir, 1991).

The literature review highlighted that the internalization of character should not only produce a sense of self-identity and strong self-motivation, but that this internalization will produce a particular social normative orientation towards leadership. That is, the leader will not just be self-motivated, but will be self-motivated to lead for particular reasons or motives that are consistent with the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards of the leadership. How leader character impacts the leader’s

motivation to lead is the focus of Research Question 2B: *How does character influence the leader's motivational orientation towards leadership?*

***Characteristic motivations.*** The third finding important to the concept of leader character emergent in this study concerns the characteristic motivations of duty and honor that constitute the motivational structure of leader character in combat. These represent two distinct types of motivations (rather than the amount or level of motivation) that correspond with the two desired end-states associated with Higgins' (1997, 1998) regulatory focus theory (RFT): the obligation to duty corresponding with RFT's strong oughts and the aspiration to honor corresponding with RFT's strong ideals. These two characteristic motivations emerge from the deep self-regulatory dynamics involved in the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership. The obligation to duty reflects leaders' internalization of the normative obligations associated with standards of leadership. It is an expression of the leader's "ought self" (Higgins et al., 1987) and the importance leaders attach to fulfilling the responsibilities associated with their role as leader. The aspiration to honor, by contrast, reflects the internalization of normative aspirations associated with the standards of leadership. It is an expression of a leader's "ideal self" (Higgins et al., 1987) and the self-importance leaders attach to proving their worthiness as a leader and earning the respect of those who matter most in combat—their fellow "brothers in arms," subordinates, peers, and superiors alike.

Both these characteristic motivations are social normative—they both reflect an obligation as well as an aspiration to affirm the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards and practice of leadership. They reflect the normative orientation towards

leadership that results when leadership standards are transformed into personal identity-conferring normative commitments. These motivations are thus similar to what Chan and Drasgow (2001) described as social normative motivations to lead. But unlike Chan and Drasgow, the social normative MTL is not limited to duty, obligation and responsibility; honor, aspirations and achievement constitute a second dimension of this component of MTL.

Combined, the strong ought associated with the obligation to duty and the strong ideal associated with the aspiration to honor suggest that the motivational structure of leader character involves a normative hierarchy in which leaders are lashed from below by baseline obligations of duty and also pulled from above by ideal aspirations to honor. That is, whereas the obligation to duty starts at the bottom of baseline normative obligations of leadership, the aspiration to honor starts at the top of highest normative aspirations of leadership. Understood this way, the two types of motivations are complementary: the obligations of duty compelling leaders to fulfill their responsibilities and the aspiration to honor inspiring them to realize certain ideals and achieve a level of martial excellence—the compulsive and the attractive, the floor and the ceiling.

These two characteristic motivations—duty and honor—constitute the deep motivational structure of the leader character in combat. However, in combat, leaders' commitment to duty and honor are besieged by adversity. As described above, combat is an environment characterized by permanent and pervasive adversity. In both its traumatic and more tedious manifestations, adversity has a corrosive effect on leaders' motivation. Under these conditions, besieged by the corrosive and cumulative effects of

adversity, sustaining the commitment to uphold the standards of leadership becomes a significant challenge for leaders. This brings us to the externalization of character and the third research question.

**Externalization of character.** The externalization of character refers to the psychological structures and processes important to the enactment of leader character. That is, it concerns how character impacts *how a leader acts*—the leader’s self-regulatory processes that govern how a leader how a leader thinks, feels and acts. Central to the externalization of character is the adversity in the environmental context in which the leader operates. Character involves an enduring and consistent way of functioning; yet what a person does in commonplace situations may be much less indicative of character than what she or he does when severely tempted or pressed. Certain aspects of character tend to emerge under stress, fatigue, or temptation. A person with character is typically thought to be one who has the “strength” to withstand adversity, to resist temptation, and overcome obstacles and challenges. We credit athletes and sports teams for “showing a lot of character” by not folding under pressure and persevering in overcoming adversity to achieve victory. The dichotomy inherent in extraordinary leader performance also underscores the importance of this capacity to enact and sustain commitment to high purposes and end values amidst a plethora of competing and conflicting lesser wants, needs and interests including self-interests. Thus, how character impacts the leader’s ability to enact the standards of leadership in the face of adversity consistently over time with reliable success in doing so is the focus of Research Question 3: *How does*



*character provide the self-regulatory “strength” to enable a leader to resist and overcome adversity?*

***Volitional disciplines.*** The fourth finding important to the concept of leader character emergent in this study concerns the volitional disciplines that enable a leader to resist adversity and sustain his performance in line with the standards of leadership. Volition refers to the conscious choice and effortful control of action; it is to do something by one’s own resources and sustained efforts, independent of countervailing forces or pressures arising either externally from the adversity in the environment or internally from temptation or impulse (Corno, 1993). Colloquially, volition is associated with *strength of will* or *willpower*, both expressions suggesting a continuum with *weakness of will* or *lack of willpower* as its opposite (Corno, 1993). Central to this notion of will is the problem of self-control—of controlling one’s behavioral responses to situations involving temptations, obstacles, adversity, etc. Specifically, self-control refers to the effortful restraint of base impulses and bringing behavior in line with normative standards, i.e., values, principles, ideals (Baumeister et al., 2007). The problem of self-control is crucial to the leader’s self-regulatory “strength” to resist and overcome adversity. This self-control, however, is not just about resisting adversity and upholding standards in a particular situation, but doing so on a sustained basis through the full range of the combat experience. Volitional discipline is intended to capture this broader self-regulatory concept of continuous and chronic struggle that requires the sustained practice of moral and practical disciplines.

Volitional disciplines thus explain how a leader sustains self-control to restrain the impulse to yield to adversity and keep his performance in line with standards. Volitional disciplines involve self-regulatory practices that correspond to and counteract the corrosive motivational effects of adversity. Practical disciplines enable leaders to resist and overcome the tedium of combat—the monotony, burnout, austerity and personal hardship of combat. Moral disciplines enable the leader to resist and overcome the trauma of combat—the significant emotional events associated with the loss, fear and frustration of combat. These volitional disciplines involve both a prevention focus oriented towards being prudent, precautionary, and vigilant in avoiding negative outcomes associated with the obligation to duty; and a promotion focus oriented towards being advancement, growth and mastery in achieving positive outcomes associated with the aspiration to honor. By practicing both promotion and prevention, a leader not only corrects and compensates for deficiencies in motivation to uphold the standards of leadership, but he also builds up greater volitional “muscle” to restrain the impulse to yield to fear, fatigue and frustration in the first place (Baumeister et al., 1994). That is, he develops a kind of self-regulatory strength to combat the corrosive effects of adversity.

This volitional strength reflects an autonomous will characterized by a strong sense of integrity grounded in responsibility and pride. This sense of integrity serves as what Puka (2004) described as the self’s “manager and disciplinarian,” the “overseer, coach or personal trainer, whipping us into shape and keeping us that way” (p. 162). It is the volitional bulwark that underpins the volitional disciplines that enable a leader to bridge the gap between their commitment to uphold the standards of leadership and their

ability to realize those commitments in action with some degree of reliable success in the face of countervailing adversity.

**The significance of character.** The findings summarized above suggest that leader character involves a complex and dynamic set of socio-psychological structures and processes important to the internalization and externalization of the standards of leadership. These structures and processes entail more than mere possession of certain virtuous traits; they involve a more fundamental and holistic altering of the self—a transformation in the leader’s *selfhood* that implicates both *who he is* (his sense of self-identity) and *how he acts* (his characteristic ways of thinking, feeling and acting)—that enables the strong form of personal moral agency characteristic of leader performance in combat. The foundation for this agentic structure of leader character is normative commitments. Normative commitment is a motivational phenomenon involving deep self-regulatory dynamics inherent in the leader’s inner struggle to come to terms with the normative demands of leadership. This deep self-regulation involves the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership into the leader’s self-identity. In this way, they are transformed into personal moral commitments such that the motivation and volition to uphold them emanates not as response to externally imposed demands, but as an expression of the leader’s identity and his integrity.

Emergent from these deep self-regulatory dynamics are the motivational and volitional capacities necessary for the leader to enact standards and make his identity-conferring commitment effective in action. The characteristic motivations of duty and honor represent two distinct types of motivations (rather than the amount or level of

motivation). Both are social normative—i.e., they reflect an obligation as well as an aspiration respectively to conform and affirm the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards and practice of leadership. But though they are socio-normative in origin, they are also constituent to and expressive of the leader's identity.

Volitional disciplines, by contrast, correct and compensate for the leader's deficiencies in motivation resulting from the corrosive effects of the adversity of combat. Volitional disciplines thus reinforce the leader's identity with a strong will characterized by a sense of integrity and the capacity for sustained self-control that enable the leader to bridge the gap between his commitment to uphold the standards of leadership and his ability to make that commitment effective in action, consistently over time in the face of continuous adversity. Characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines are thus complementary capacities reflecting the dual inhibitive and proactive nature of leader agency: volitional disciplines enabling the leader to resist and overcome the adversity of combat and characteristic motivations moving the leader to uphold the standards of leadership.

In sum, these agentic resources that constitute leader character provide the capacity to resolve both the normative and volitional dimensions of the leader's inner struggle and explain the leader's willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards of leadership in the face of adversity. Such extraordinary leader performance cannot be explained by external regulation or more instrumental or hedonistic approaches to motivation (Shamir, 1991); but only by the kind of identified and integrated regulation integral to the agentic structure of leader character in which by risking his life in

upholding standards, a leader makes a statement about his identity and his integrity—about the kind of leader he is and the things he cares about most deeply.

*Synthesis.* Implicit in this agentic structure of leader character is a synthesis in which, through the internalization and integration of the standards of leadership, the dichotomy inherent to extraordinary leader performance is resolved. As indicated above, the fundamental premise of extraordinary leader performance is that a dichotomy or dialectical tension exists between standards on one hand and adversity on the other; between high purposes and good ends on one hand, and lesser wants, needs and responsibilities on the other. This dualism is also reflected in the debate between egoism and altruism (Avolio & Locke, 2002) and in the distinction between personalized and socialized charismatic leaders highlighted in the literature review in Chapter 2: socialized charismatic leaders are socially constructive, egalitarian, and are oriented towards serving others and the collective interests; personalized charismatic leaders, by contrast, are dominant, self-interested, self-aggrandizing and authoritarian and use their power to obtain their followers' obedience and submission (House & Howell, 1992). In short, pervasive in the understanding of extraordinary leader performance is a dualism between the personalized, selfish and baser tendencies of a leader and the socialized, unselfish and noble tendencies.

The agentic structure of leader character, however, suggests that this dualism no longer holds. That is, the dualism between socialized and personalized, altruism and egotism does not adequately explain the place of the self in character. Between these polarities is a middle way that emerges in and through the internalization and integration

of the standards of leadership. Integral to this middle way is the leader's choice regarding his commitments. This is not choice, however, in the sense usually intended in moral psychology involving some sort of in situ, discrete ethical dilemma requiring complex moral reasoning to resolve. Choice here refers to the deep structure of choice that involves choosing the values, principles and ideals that come to be self-defining (Wren, 1991). From this deeper perspective, leaders can choose to lead for noble or ignoble reasons; for selfish and self-serving reasons; or for reasons that reflect a commitment to projects, causes and ideals greater than themselves.

For a leader of character, choice from this deep structure level involves the desire to realize a kind of self who attaches his or her long-term self-interest to noble, just, worthy and right objects subsumed under the concept of *the good* (Murdoch, 2009). It involves choosing and having reliable and praiseworthy motives, expressed in chosen actions over time that produce and preserve the fundamental values, principles and ideals of the community and that have come to have intrinsic value to the leader such that they are self-determined in their enactment of those values, principles and ideals (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Solomon, 1992). This kind of self understands itself in neither personalized or socialized terms, neither egotistic nor altruistic terms, but in terms of commitment to certain socially valued purposes and ends.

From the perspective of such self-defining commitments to socially worthy projects, causes and ideals, self-sacrifice and other such self-destructive acts are not perceived by the leader as such; rather they are perceived as self- and life-affirming extensions of his chosen commitments (Bergman, 2004). This self-affirmation is

grounded in the bond the leader has with his moral community—his “band of brothers”—and the deep caring about and identity-conferring commitment he has to the values, principles and ideals of this community that are embedded in the standards and practice of leadership. The willingness to sacrifice in service to these commitments reflects something that for the leader has a sacred quality—something of great important and worthy of his service and even his life. The willingness to sacrifice therefore can be seen, paradoxically, not as destructive of the self, but as affirmation of the self.

And this is the synthesis or middle way that reconciles the dichotomy inherent in extraordinary leader performance. For such a leader, sacrifice when it comes—and if it comes, for it is not sought—is a consummation of his identity-conferring commitment, not a negation of it (Coker, 2007). The willingness to sacrifice, in short, is the characteristic virtue of a leader who understands his self as essentially social; that understands that his own interests and that of the community are one and the same. For him, it’s better to die rather than to turn his back on his social nature (Coker, 2007). This is the essence of the self-identity associated with the agentic structure of leader character and reflects the essential synthesis the resolves the leader’s inner struggle – both the normative and the volitional.

**Root construct of leader character.** The literature review highlighted the need for clarity surrounding essential concepts and relationships that constitute leader character (e.g., Sosik & Cameron, 2010; Hannah & Avolio, 2011). Integral to achieving this clarity is identifying the root construct(s) underlying leader character that can facilitate a theoretically meaningful integrative framework that explains extraordinary

leader performance. Identifying the root construct underlying leader character and extraordinary leader performance is the focus of Research Question 4: *What is the root construct underlying leader character?*

The root construct emergent in the concept of leader character in this study is *agency*. To be an agent is intentionally influence one's own functioning and the course of environmental events as well as other's functioning (Bandura, 2008). Leaders are by definition agents in this regard. As indicated above, the agency associated with extraordinary leader performance represents a particular form of agency—what I characterized as a strong form of personal moral agency. It is a form of *personal* and *moral* agency because this influence is exercised individually by the leader and directed towards upholding normative standards of leadership (Bandura, 1986; Brown, et al., 2005). And it is a *strong* form of agency because this influence is exercised in the face of countervailing adversity—the tedium and trauma of combat—and even at risk of life. This notion of the primacy of *leader agency* over adversity constitutes the critical empirical insight that informs the theoretical framework for the concept of leader character emergent in this study.

As discussed above, the structure of leader character that enables this strong form of personal moral agency is rooted in the internalization of the standards of leadership in the form of normative commitments and entails both characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines necessary for the leader to bring influence to bear in a way that successfully resists adversity of combat and upholds standards of leadership. Thus, in contrast to prevailing trait-based conceptions that explain leader character in terms of



“top down” theoretically derived ideal personality attributes—virtues and character strengths—believed important to leadership; the emergent agency-based approach explains leader character in terms of “bottom up” agentic capabilities that enable a leader to bring personal influence to bear in upholding standards and resisting adversity. This macro-level distinction highlights the overall contribution of this study to understanding the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance in combat.

Beyond this, the agentic approach presented here provides a more holistic and integrative approach to leader character that extends beyond a narrow focus on traits to include important aspects related to the internalization and externalization of character presented above. I highlight four key aspects of this agentic approach that provide enable it provide a better organizing principle for understanding leader character and extraordinary leader performance.

***Socially embedded.*** First, this agentic approach recognizes the interplay between human agency and social structures (Bandura, 2008). The concept of leader character emergent in this study is inherently social in that it is embedded in the social practice of leadership. The conventional psychological approach views character as an autonomous set of traits or other qualities possessed by a solitary individual. Character, however, does not exist in a psychological vacuum; it is inherently social in its constitution. It is inseparable from and in significant ways, reflects, even incarnates the moral culture in which it is located (Hunter, 2000). This is not to deny the psychological aspect of character, but merely to recognize that character is a function of the social order as it is a manifestation of the individual person. Such character is inculcated through social

learning by engagement in social practices (e.g., leadership), internalization of the standards associated with those standards which reflect the values, principles and ideals of the community. (Bandura, 1986).

***Environmentally situated.*** Second, this agentic approach recognizes the interplay between human agency and situational dynamics in the environment in which a leader operates (Bandura, 2008). Among the situational factors that bear most heavily on character is adversity— in this study the tedium and trauma of combat that has a chronic and acute corrosive effect on morale and motivation. Certain aspects of character tend to emerge under stress, fatigue, or temptation. Yet, a leader with character is typically thought to be one who has the “strength” to withstand adversity, to resist temptation, and overcome obstacles and challenges (Kupperman, 1991). A concept of leader character based on idealized traits fails to capture these situational dynamics and especially the influence of adversity on leaders. The models that emerge from such approaches abstracted, from the difficult realities of real life, tend to reify virtues and the social ideals they reflect. An agentic approach is fully immersed in the situational dynamics and adversity.

***Centrality of the self.*** Third, leader self and identity are at the core of this agentic approach to leader character (Bandura, 2008). It emphasizes the self-regulatory processes that explain the internalization of character—e.g., the deep self-regulatory processes involved in internalization and integration of standards into the leader’s self identity. It also emphasizes the self-regulatory processes that explain the externalization of character—e.g., the promotion and prevention focused self-regulatory practices that

enable the sustained self-control to enact standards consistently over time. Thus, rather than traits as the locus of leader character, and agentic approach shifts the locus of leader character to self-based agentic resources important to resolving the dialectical tension inherent in leadership.

***Bringing influence to bear.*** Ultimately, this agentic approach redefines the locus of leader character from traits to agentic resources that enable the leader to *bring influence to bear* in upholding standards associated with the practice of leadership and resisting adversity associated with the environment of combat. The capability to bring influence to bear that is central to this agentic approach to character is also central to the concept of leadership, the essence of which is the influence a leader brings to bear on others as well as him or herself to achieve group or organizational goals and objectives (Manz & Sims, 1980, 1987; Northouse, 2013). This agentic approach therefore through its focus on agentic resources that enable a leader to bring influence to bear provides a more explicit theoretical explanation for the relationship between leader character and extraordinary leader performance than provided by prevailing trait-based approaches.

### **Implications of Emergent Concept of Leader Character**

In addition to the insights and propositions provided above in answer to the research questions guiding this study, it is important to point out how this study's findings lay the groundwork for future empirical efforts focused specifically on understanding the significance of leader character to extraordinary leader performance and leadership more generally. Character is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon that has proven to be a lacuna in leadership research in particular and psychology more

generally. Definitions of character vary widely and conceptualizations that can be effectively operationalized and scientifically validated have proven elusive (Leonard, 1997; Sperry, 1999). The challenge is complicated by the fact that the idea of character has strong moral overtones that reflect normative values, principles and ideals of a particular community (Hunter, 2000). Thus, character refers to not just a descriptive psychological construct, but also a normative ethical construct. Additionally, character-based approaches to positive leadership suffer from a lack of comprehensive, integrative theoretical models explicating the relation between character and leadership (Sosik & Cameron, 2010). Many models adopt narrow trait-based conceptions emphasizing specific moral virtues and character strengths. All these factors underscore the need for what Sperry (1999) described as “an integrative operational model of character and its components that can be systematically studied” (p. 215). Hannah & Avolio (2011) similarly argue that the concept that needs to be unpacked so that the “field of leadership has a clearer starting point for advancing both theory and research on what constitutes leader character” (p. 979). The concept of leader character emergent in this study contributes to this research agenda. Below, I address five specific research topics that follow from the concept of character emergent in this study which subsequent research can address for the benefit of a more robust understanding of leader character and its significance to leadership.

**Beyond traits.** Prevailing conceptions of leader character tend toward abstract and idealistic notions of trait possession. By contrast, classical as well as emerging philosophical and psychological conceptions recognize character as a complex, dynamic

phenomenon and treat it more holistically (Lapsley & Power, 2005). Character in this broader more holistic sense is fundamentally concerned with *selfhood*—the qualities by virtue of which a person is oneself (Baumeister, 1987). It implicates both *who a person is* (a person’s sense of self and identity) and *how a person acts* (a person’s characteristic ways of thinking, feeling, and acting). From this perspective, leader character is not limited to traits. It includes a leader’s dominant characteristics but also involves the sense of self and identity as well as the self-regulatory processes that control the way the leader thinks, feels and acts. A leader can be understood to have character in this more holistic sense of selfhood when there is unity between virtues (reflecting the values, principles and ideals of the community), the leader’s self-identity, and the self-regulatory processes that govern his/her actions. Thus, the key limitation of the prevailing trait-based approach to leader character is not that it emphasizes traits (virtues/character strengths) per se, but that it focuses narrowly on traits and neglects how these are internalized and integrated into the leader’s self-identity and self-regulatory processes.

A key contribution of this study is the decentering of traits as the locus of leader character and shifting the focus to the leader’s sense of self-identity and the agentic self-regulatory resources (characteristic motivations and volitional disciplines) that enable extraordinary leader performance. In decentering the focus on traits, my intent was not to abandon them, but rather to “open the hood” so to speak to better understand their inner workings: What are the self-regulatory structures and processes associated with virtues? What are the specific self-motivational processes associated with virtues? How are virtues internalized and integrated into a leader’s sense of self and identity? The intent

here is to get beyond character as a narrow focus on traits in the abstract, and address character as a more holistic phenomenon—a special kind of selfhood that includes traits but other important psychological structures and processes as well.

This allows us to build theories of character that take advantage of a wider range of personality theory—which is the science of the self. To this end, the psychological roots of character in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reveal a broader approach to character that drew from a wide range of theoretical paradigms including: James' (1950) emphasis on the self and identity; Freud's (1960) psychodynamic-motivational theory of the id, ego and superego; Rogers (1963) and Maslow (1968) phenomenological-humanistic focus on self-actualization; Dewy's (1922) emphasis on habits and behavioral conditioning; Bandura's (1986) social cognitive focus on certain agentic self-regulatory processes; as well as neurobiological foundations (Cloninger, Svrakic, & Pryzbeck, 1993). From this perspective, future research on leader character can be advanced by returning to its psychological roots to tap this legacy that was more expansive and creative in its theoretical approach to understanding character.

**Character-based motivation to lead.** A significant contribution of this study is the finding that the motivation to lead that emerges from the leader's normative commitment to the standards and practice of leadership reflect two distinct social normative types of motivation—the obligation to duty and the aspiration to honor. Both these characteristic motivations are social normative—they both reflect an obligation as well as an aspiration to conform and affirm the values, principles and ideals embedded in the standards and practice of leadership. But the characteristic motivations of duty and

honor are also important in that they are not primarily instrumental motivations. That is, they are not primarily concerned with consequences or effectiveness, but with expression of the leader's identity-conferring commitment to the standards of leadership and specifically the values, principles and ideals that underpin them.

This self-expressive as opposed to the instrumental aspect of a leader's motivation to lead is neglected in contemporary leadership theory. March and Weil (2005), for example, argue that a "logic of consequences" underlies virtually all discussion of motivation, incentives, and decision making in leadership (p. 84). Such leadership demands great action and great commitment justified by expectations of great consequences. This dynamic is sustained by a belief in its instrumental effectiveness. March and Weil (2005) argue that there is little question that extraordinary leader performance often arise from a feeling that one is capable of or involved in something of great consequence; leaders who feel that they are effective and recognized as such involve themselves more fully in their organization, participate more in political life, and take more initiatives. However, when taken to the extreme, this consequentialist logic tends to produce a "culture of success" that stimulates a "culture of exaggerated beliefs in capabilities" (March & Weil, 2005, p. 85), which in turn can produce the same kind of rationalized self-serving opportunism (Burns, 1978) described in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Normative commitments and the characteristic motivations of duty and honor lie outside such an instrumental, consequentialist logic. They reflect more what March and Weil (2005, p. 84) describe as a "logic of identity" that consists in acting according to

one's own concept of oneself. To this end, Katz and Kahn (1966) posited value-expression and self-idealization, which they defined as the motivation to establish and maintain a satisfactory self-concept, as an important motivational pattern in organizations. The self-importance is not so much a matter of social recognition, as confirming one's notion of the sort of person one sees oneself to be and expressing the values appropriate to the self-identity (Katz and Kahn, 1966).

The commitment to duty and honor are motivations that follow a similar logic. They are expressive of the leader's self-identity and the values, principles and ideals that define this self-identity. Within this logic of identity, leader's actions are no longer justified by their instrumental consequences, by what he can expect from them; rather, they are justified by how they express the leader's identity and their consistency with underlying values, principles and ideals. To the extent that the leader's values and self-identities are socially constituted and reflective of the values, principles and ideals of his moral community, then they serve to synthesize the leader's motivation to lead with the common good and social welfare.

The key point is that a logic of identity does not rely on a consequentialist logic. Rather, it draws on a variety of self structures and processes in which the motivation to lead is self-guided, self-affirming and self-expressive of values, principles and ideals that are important to the leader's self-understanding. Such a self-identity based theory of motivation does not reject a consequentialist logic, but emphasizes its insufficiency, especially in the context of the demands of leadership to subordinate self-interests and serve and even sacrifice for the common good (Shamir, 1991). This study suggests that



such a logic of identity provides a vital motivational foundation for a theory of leader character that explains extraordinary leader performance and specifically the willingness to sacrifice in serving the common good. Future research is required to further develop and refine this self-based concept of leader motivation.

**Leader development.** Another topic important for future research emergent from this study is leader development and specifically, the development of the agentic resources that constitute the concept of leader character emergent in this study. Leader development is viewed as a process of enhancing the fit between the requirements of the leader role and personal identity (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009). This process has recently been conceptualized to occur at multiple levels in an ongoing fashion across the lifespan (Day et al., 2009). At the most visible exterior level is the acquisition of leadership competencies through the development of relevant technical expertise. At the next deeper level, leader development is associated with self-regulation and leader self-identity development. At the deepest and most interior level, leader development occurs within the broader domain of adult development and specific processes associated with the selection, optimization, and compensation of motivating goals and goal-related resources that underpin self-regulation, identity development and competency acquisition.

Leader character can be understood within this leader development paradigm as concerned with the more interior processes of self-regulation and identity development within a broader context of adult development. However, much of the focus of leader development emphasizes the technical competence of leaders and neglects the deeper

interior core of leader development associated with character (Day et al., 2009). There therefore is a need to complement this focus on technical skill and competence with a similar focus on character and interior core of the leader. Notwithstanding this general neglect of the interior core of leader development, one notable exception to this is authentic leadership development (ALD) (Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). ALD provides a compelling theoretical framework for understanding leader development important to the concept of leader character emergent in this study.

ALD is grounded in the root construct of authenticity. The crux of ALD's approach is the leader's authentic self-awareness grounded in core values that are made effective in action through internally driven self-regulatory processes; both self-awareness and self-regulation in turn are heightened and strengthened by positive psychological capacities—confidence, optimism, hope and resiliency. Combined, self-awareness, self-regulation and positive psychological capital produce positive leadership capacity for extraordinary leader performance (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

ALD shares many conceptual similarities with the concept of leader character emergent in this study suggesting important insights into the development of leader character. However, character is not a formal ALD construct and thus the role of leader character in ALD is ambiguous. Although both put the locus of leadership in the self, the essential nature of character and authenticity and how they each approach development of the self perhaps differs significantly.

Authenticity as the core construct of ALD is highly self-referential in nature (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). At a pure conceptual level, the authentic self does not involve

any explicit consideration of “others”; instead, the authentic self is seen as “existing wholly by the laws of its own being” (Erickson, 1995, p. 125, cited in Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 320). The gist is that the authentic self operates as a social force in its own right and is “unencumbered by others’ expectations for them” (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p. 319). The authentic leader is truly the master of his fate and captain of his soul, to paraphrase the poet William Henley. This self-referential nature of authenticity influences how authenticity is achieved in ALD. ALD adopts more of a “self-centric” approach to authentic self development; that is, its start point and emphasis is on achieving authentic self-awareness through introspective self-reflection. Authentic selfhood is achieved when there is alignment between the leader’s internal core beliefs, their self-identity, and their leadership actions.

By contrast, the concept of leader character emergent in this study is less self-referential. Character begins with the idea that people are first and foremost members of a moral community fulfilling certain social roles that carry normative demands. For a leader to have character therefore is to have internalized the characteristics, qualities or virtues most valued and respected by the culture in which one is embedded and belongs (Hunter, 2000). This social-centric nature of character influences how character is approached and achieved in most conceptualizations going back to Aristotle. In contrast to authenticity and its “self-centric” approach, character tends to suggest a more of a “social-centric” approach to self development; that is, its start point and emphasis is on inculcating standards through socialization processes. Character-based selfhood is

achieved when there is unity between the standards reflecting the values, principles and ideals of the community, the leader's self-identity, and the leader's actions.

In sum, research on leader development and specifically development of leader character and the interior core of the leader is limited. ALD represents perhaps one of the more robust leader development theories that focuses explicitly on this interior core. Yet, its focus on authenticity as the root construct creates significant ambiguity about the conceptualization of leader character in relation to authenticity and its role in ALD. Research on leader character and its development needs to examine these conceptual ambiguities.

**Leader character and culture.** Closely related to the development of leader character is the need for research examining the social context and specifically the culture in which leaders are embedded that make leader character and its development possible in the first place. An important finding from this study is recognition of the social nature of character. As indicated above, it begins with the idea that leaders are first and foremost members of a moral community engaged in a social practice that is governed by certain standards valued by that community. These standards constitute the social reference point—the set of normative criteria—around which the character of the leader is formed and evaluated (Bandura, 2008; Higgins, 1990). Leader character from this perspective is very much social in its constitution. It is inseparable from the moral culture and social practice in which it is embedded and engaged. In significant ways, leader character reflects, even incarnates, this moral culture (Hunter, 2000).

This socialized concept of leader character thus suggests a strong correspondence between the culture in which a leader is embedded and the character that emerges in leaders. This correspondence between culture and character highlights the need to understand the aspects of culture that are conducive to development of leader character capable of extraordinary leader performance. To this end, leader character researchers have long recognized the importance of culture to character (e.g., Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Sosik & Cameron, 2010). Much of the treatment of culture however, adopts a dualistic approach focusing on collectivistic cultures (e.g., Japan) and individualistic cultures (e.g., United States) and their relationship to character (e.g., Sosik & Cameron, 2010). There is a need however, as suggested by this study, to move beyond dualistic treatments of culture and examine the deeper aspects of culture important to character development, such as the nature of the social relationships, social practices and the specific normative content—the underlying values, principles and ideals—of the culture in which the leader is embedded.

An important aspect of this research is to examine whether a particular social context—an organization or society—has what sociologists refer to as the structural fitness to develop and sustain leader character (Hunter, 2000). To this end, over the last century, a series of social scientists have argued that modern liberal industrial society perhaps does not (see Hunter, 2000 for a thorough treatment of this topic). The main premise of these arguments is that the social institutions (e.g., family, community, etc) that traditionally housed the values, principles and ideals central to character have weakened to the extent that the possibility of character itself has become dubious. This is

perhaps particularly the case in the contemporary business culture. Though the competitive forces of business and commerce have long been recognized to have a strong corrupting influence on character and the culture that supports it (cf., Hanley, 2009); in recent decades, the forces of “creative destruction” have multiplied and intensified making the practice of business increasingly unforgiving, mercilessly efficient and vastly more complex and fast paced. In this environment, the culture of business leadership has become increasingly dominated by a logic of consequences described above (March & Weil, 2005) producing a corrupt version of Burns’ (1978) ethic of responsibility described in the literature review. The implication of this social cultural trend to the possibility of developing and sustaining leader character is thus an important topic to advance research on leader character.

**Social influence of leader character.** This study focused on the influence of character on the leader him- or herself—i.e., the self-influence of character. However, leadership is typically understood as a social process the essence of which is the influence the leader has on others (Northouse, 2013). To this end, data collected as part of this study suggest that leader character has significant social influence effects that are essential to leadership. This influence emerges through a leader’s performance and the reputation for character a leader earns based this performance that engenders followers’ trust and respect. The significance of these social influence effects are suggested by the following empirical observations that were gathered as part of this study.

Consider again SSG K’s actions in low crawling up the hill under fire that I used to introduce the character to lead in the previous chapter. After the mission back at the

combat outpost (COP) when his soldiers were cleaning their weapons and gear, they “swapped stories” about SSG K’s action during that ambush: “Hey, did you see SSG K out there in that first contact?” “Yeah, that was awesome!” “Awesome” reflects the high admiration SSG K’s soldiers have for him. To a man, they respect him and trust him with their lives. Their positive regard (respect) and assured reliance (trust) reflects the influence of SSG K’s character. Leaders like SSG K who consistently uphold the normative standards of leadership in the face of adversity, as analyzed in the previous chapter, earn the respect and trust of soldiers. This trust and respect reflects soldiers’ evaluations of his character and credibility as a leader that is decisive to their willingness to follow.

Yet, the leader’s reputation for character is not only essential to leader’s effectiveness in a practical sense in that it counts heavily towards soldiers’ willingness to follow, but it also fundamentally transforms the dynamics of the platoon and the performance of his soldiers. The trust and respect engendered by leader character inspires a reciprocal shared commitment among soldiers to uphold the normative standards associated with the practice of leadership. This shared commitment promotes the emergence of shared leadership as well as the emergence of strong family-like bonds that bind leaders and soldiers together as a “band of brothers.” Leaders and soldiers who share leadership and strong bonds based on shared trust and respect in turn exhibit a tendency to perform “above and beyond” the limits of their training in critical situations encountered in combat. The emergence of shared leadership, strong bonds and performance beyond training constitute the primary significance of leader character as a

social and not just an individual phenomenon. These social influence effects of leader character are relatively under-studied but represent an important future research topic emergent from this study.

**Limitations.** As with any inductive ethnographic study, there is a potential for the study to result in idiosyncratic findings that might be difficult to extend to other more organizational contexts. This study is no different, especially given the extreme context for this study. However, I view this potential limitation as an opportunity to glean insights beyond those likely to be achieved in a more conventional organizational context. Combat provides the context for this study because the adversity that leaders face in such an extreme context tends to make character a more salient and readily observable phenomenon than in more conventional organizational contexts (Wright & Quick, 2011; Hannah et al., 2009). Therefore, it affords the opportunity to observe aspects of leader character that are less salient and less observable in more conventional organizational contexts. Further, because the emergent concept of leader character in this study is framed around dialectical model that is inherent in extraordinary leader performance in any context, the concept of character emergent in this study should transfer to other more conventional leadership contexts. That is, the concept of character should generalize.

Specific aspects of the model, however, will require refinement to reflect the specific social and situational dynamics important to more conventional contexts. For example, in more conventional organizational context, the nature of the adversity that leaders face will certainly change—less extreme forms of danger and perhaps more



chronic and subtle forms of stress. Additionally, in other contexts, the practice of leadership and the standards associated with it will certainly change. In the U.S. Army, the standards associated with leadership are oriented towards traditional martial virtues—duty, honor, courage, etc. (Osiel, 1999). In other contexts, other virtues may be more central to character or the expression of these same virtues may take different form. In sum, though the agency-based concept of character emergent in this study is theoretically robust enough to transfer to less extreme contexts, understanding how the specific aspects of the model change when applied in more conventional contexts is task for follow on research.

An important methodological limitation of this study concerns the split data analysis between the first phase, which was conducted in the field, and the second phase, which was conducted at home in the United States. The analysis I conducted during the first phase was limited and based off initial coding from notes. It was not until I returned to the United States when I was able to transcribe my interview data and conduct rigorous coding (axial and selective). The limitation caused by this is that I was unable to fully exercise the iterative process of collection and analysis important to grounded theory. I had one opportunity in the field in Afghanistan to collect my data over a six-month period of time. Upon return to the United States, I had no opportunity to further pursue data collection in response to theoretical sampling and gaps my analysis revealed. I mitigated this limitation by conducting some follow up telephone interviews with some of my key informants, but the difficulty locating people who have since separated from the Army made this of limited value.

Another potential limitation in inductive research involves the biases the researcher brings with him/her to the field experience. My explicit focus on leader character and social and psychological processes associated with it have undoubtedly introduced bias into this study and have had some effect on my interpretation of the data. Consequently, the findings from this study might be viewed with caution by those whose preference is for a more objective approach to science. However, no social science research occurs without some researcher bias. It is therefore up to the reader to decide how credible or plausible the findings and their implications are for the domain of interest. Notwithstanding, the researcher can take steps to mitigate bias and establish the credibility of the findings. In my discussion of methods in Chapter 4, I enumerated the steps I followed to ensure credibility of the findings. For instance, I have closely followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions for building trustworthiness into my study (see Table 4.1), including implementing the key steps of clearly delineating the context in which these findings emerged, explicitly discussing how and why these findings might apply to a larger domain, and ensuring that the emerging data and model made sense to my informants. Nonetheless, it is still possible that my interpretive focus might have precluded me from capturing other important aspects of leader character and thus missing potential insights valuable to understanding its significance to extraordinary leader performance.

Additionally, as with any qualitative research project, there were several respects in which I could have been misled by my informants (Charmaz, 2006). For example, during interviews, the participants may have chosen not to reveal topics of a sensitive

nature, thus influencing my understanding of their experiences. Or, conversely, the participant may have misinterpreted questions or mis-remembered interactions. This would also inadvertently influence the reported data. Finally, the process of self-reflection required by interview participants can be psychologically demanding, which may have limited the participants' willingness to explore their own experiences. Obviously, there was no foolproof way to determine a participant's truthfulness, intentionality or level of self-reflection, but I followed all recommended guidelines and attempted to triangulate all data, especially through my participant-observation which enabled me to closely observe and experience first-hand the phenomenon described by my informants in my interviews with them. Overall, I am confident that the data gathered from my informants and my participant observation was trustworthy and forms a solid foundation for the study's emergent model.

## **Conclusion**

After decades of dormancy, character is re-emerging as an important research topic among organizational leadership researchers (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Leonard, 1997; Thompson & Riggio, 2010; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). This renewed interest in character is a response to efforts to better explain the source of certain exemplary and ethical leader behaviors associated with positive forms of leadership—e.g., authentic, transformational and ethical leadership theories (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). However, recent efforts to operationalize character are criticized for their normative and idealistic trait-based conceptualizations that fail to capture the reality of leadership and situational dynamics (Conger & Hollenbeck, 2010). In response,

researchers have called for more robust frameworks for understanding the complex nature of character and the role it plays in leadership (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Sosik & Cameron, 2010). The purpose and challenge of this study is to develop a more novel theoretical approach to character in leadership that is empirically grounded in the real life complexities of leadership.

An important contribution of this study is that the emergent concept of leader character is fully situated in the leader's social and environmental context represented by the leader's *inner struggle* to resist the adversity of combat and uphold the standards of leadership. In this dialectical framework, certain agentic resources important to resolving this inner struggle emerge as the locus of leader character. This agency-based concept of character is rooted in the internalization of the standards of leadership through identity-conferring normative commitments and entails particular motivational and volitional capacities. These produce a distinct mode of functioning—a strong form of personal moral agency—characterized by the leader's willingness to sacrifice in upholding standards in the face of adversity. This primacy of leader agency over adversity is the hallmark of leader character—what I call the *character to lead*.

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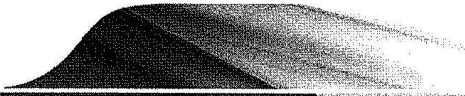
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APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL





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Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

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**To:** Kevin Corley  
BA

 **From:** Mark Roosa, Chair   
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 03/19/2010

**Committee Action:** Expedited Approval

**Approval Date:** 03/19/2010

**Review Type:** Expedited F7

**IRB Protocol #:** 1003004942

**Study Title:** Combat Leadership and the Role of Moral Character

**Expiration Date:** 03/18/2011

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

**Adverse Reactions:** If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.

## COMBAT LEADERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF MORAL CHARACTER

June-December, 2010

Dear Soldier:

My name is Major Peter L. Jennings. I am a reserve officer assigned to the Army Center for the Professional Military Ethic (ACPME) at West Point. I am also doctoral student under the direction of Professor Kevin G. Corley in the Department of Management, W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study of leadership, moral character and combat effectiveness.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve an interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time.

Your participation is voluntary and by answering interview questions you are consenting that the data collected will be used for research purposes only. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty and no repercussions from your chain of command.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this interview. However, this study is being conducted with the support of the Army Center of Excellence for the Professional Military Ethic (ACPME) at the request of the MNF-A Commander so that lessons learned from this conflict can be utilized to improve the development of future training, education and development for Soldiers and the Army.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

I would like to digitally audio record this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

All the information you provide in this interview will be completely confidential and used for research purposes only. The following are some of the procedures I will use to ensure your anonymity. During this interview, you will not be asked for your name or social security number or any other identifying information and please try to refrain from providing any identifying information about yourself or other Soldiers. After the interview, I will transcribe my hand written notes into an electronic "Word" document and then destroy the handwritten notes by burning or shredding them. This Word document along with the digital recordings from this interview (if you agree to audio recording of the interview) will be saved and maintained on my secure, passcode protected personal computer. I will assign a code to represent this interview that only I know. This code will not be provided to anyone outside the research team or to anyone in your chain of command. The digital recordings will be maintained until I return to the United States in December, 2010, when I will have written transcripts made of the

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recordings. Any and all personal identifying information will be omitted from these transcripts to ensure your anonymity. Once written transcripts are completed, I will delete all digital recordings. Data from this interview will be combined with data from other interviews to assess results. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name or other identifying information will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at:

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If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

Thank you again for your input and for taking time to help with what we feel is an important survey to better equip the Army warfighter for combat.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Peter L. Jennings is a scholar with significant business and military leadership experience who brings a strong practical orientation to his research and teaching. His focus is the psychology of character and its significance to the practice of leadership.

After completing a B.S. in Economics at Miami University, Pete accepted a commission in the U.S. Marines where he excelled as an Infantry Officer. He was hand-selected for special leadership assignments and was highly decorated, including a Bronze Star Medal with combat distinguishing "V" device for heroic actions during Operation Desert Storm and a Meritorious Service Medal for exemplary service during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

After obtaining an MBA from Michigan State University, Pete worked as a management consultant for Price Waterhouse where he was recognized for significant leadership contribution. He then joined the management team at IBM where he progressed rapidly through operations and supply chain positions of increasing responsibility.

Pete conducted his doctoral studies at Arizona State University, W. P. Carey School of Business, and is currently serving on Active Duty as a Major in the U.S. Army Reserve. He is the Research Director for the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) located at the United States Military Academy at West Point. In his current role, Pete has conducted significant field research in support of a Department of the Army level strategic initiative to develop official concepts and doctrine for its professional ethic and character-based leader development model.

Pete is highly committed to bringing his diverse leadership experience and character research to bear in positively impacting both the practice and education of business management.