

Retired Army officers Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, now at the Army War College, say they interviewed scores of Army officers at three U.S. Army posts, the Pentagon, and the war college itself. What follows are quotes from the officers they interviewed detailing what they lied about, why they lied, and their concerns over its possible impact.

“It’s a systemic problem throughout the entire Army . . . We can probably do two or three things in a day, but if you give us 20, we’re gonna half-ass 15 and hope you ignore the other five.”

“You find ways to qualify your answer. It’s not quibbling—it’s assuming risk.”

“We’ve always pencil-whipped training.”

“For us, it was those little tasks that had to get done when we got returned from predeployment block leave—the number of taskings went through the roof. None [by] themselves were extremely extensive—like a 15-minute online course. The problem was getting your formation to do it with the availability of computers and then the ability to print and prove that you had taken it. So I think that some of the training got lost in translation. For a nine-man squad, they would pick the smartest dude, and he would go and take it nine times for the other members of his squad and then that way they had a certificate to prove that they had completed it.”

“I had a platoon sergeant when I first became a platoon leader, and I walked into the office and he was printing out certificates with people’s names on them. I was like, ‘What are you doing?’ He says, ‘Mandatory training!’ It was so accepted. It’s almost like corruption.

“I sat in a log synch and they’re like, ‘What’s your vehicle percentage?’ I said, ‘I’m at 90%.’ [But] if [anyone] told me to move them tomorrow, [I knew] they would all break. For months and months and months we reported up ‘90%, Good-to-go on vehicles!’—knowing that it didn’t matter because it carried no weight. It literally was just filling a box on a slide.”

“We were asked to go to off-post housing to check on soldier quality of life. Folks were uncomfortable going so they pencil-whipped it.”

“The Army would rather us make up dates saying, ‘Yes, we did it’ as opposed to saying, ‘Hey, I messed up.’”

“We needed to get SHARP [Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention] training done and reported to higher headquarters, so we called the platoons and told them to gather the boys around the radio and we said, ‘Don’t touch girls.’ That was our quarterly SHARP training.”

“We found ways to beat the system. You show up in country and you get a layout and immediately what do you do? You do a shortage annex for everything. So that way the Army—with an infinite budget in country—would replenish your product [even though] the unit never really lost the equipment in the beginning.”

“The cost of investigating a lost widget isn’t worth the cost of the item; they write it off and later say it was lost to the Pakistanis.”

“We were required to inspect 150 polling sites in Iraq (which nobody could possibly ever do) and fill out an elaborate spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was to get validation for higher that you did what they told you to. We gave them what they wanted.”

“I show up [in Iraq or Afghanistan} and [the readiness assessments of the Afghan or Iraq fighters being trained by the U.S. military] go yellow or green to red. I’m ready to leave—they go from yellow to green. We went through the reports with the CG every ninety days. Everyone wanted to believe what they wanted to believe.”

“Every contact with the enemy required a storyboard. People did not report enemy contact because they knew the storyboard was useless and they didn’t want to go through the hassle.”

“I understand there is a higher reporting requirement of which I reported verbally, and I did a proper debrief—I wrote it down and then I sent it to them. [But now] I have to combine a bunch of pictures onto a PowerPoint slide. Now I’m doing this storyboard because there’s an IED, because a donkey fell off the mountain, because some dude’s dog came in and I had to shoot it on the COP and now this dude is mad. It became an absolute burden. So what ended up happening was [that] after about the first couple of months, you’re saving your storyboards, and as soon as you had an incident that [was] somewhat similar to what you already had, it became a cut and paste gig. And the quality of the information that you are giving them wasn’t painting the picture for higher as to what was going on. And you can say, ‘Yes, Lieutenant, you should have done better.’ You’re absolutely right. But when I only had 4 hours between this mission and the next, what’s better – spending 15 minutes to make this beautiful storyboard or planning my next operation?”

“Where do the story boards go? They’re going to [a] magic storyboard heaven somewhere where there are billions of storyboards that are collected or logged somehow? After doing hundreds of storyboards, I honestly can’t tell you where any of them go. I send them to my battalion level element who does something with them who then sends them to some other element who eventually puts them on a screen in front of somebody who then prints them out and shreds them? I don’t know.”

“Counterfire became a big issue in terms of [the] ability to counterfire when you were receiving IDF. Some companies in our battalion were returning fire without an accurate grid [and without getting the required OK from their higher headquarters]. They got shot at so they shot back. Of course, they were out in the middle of nowhere with a low chance of collateral damage. [But] people in our battalion knew, and just didn’t say anything. I’m not sure how high up people knew, but it was accepted. That was the norm. We’ll just not say anything about it.”

“CERP [Commander’s Emergency Response Program] money [which U.S. officers distributed to local leaders in mutli-thousand-dollar amounts] is an area where we probably fudge. We gave company commanders a lot of money

that we powered down to people who weren't trained. We probably submitted reports that weren't accurate."

"I don't think it's that anyone expects you to lie. But I think there is an expectation of—I think the word is—equivocation...I don't want to say it's accepted, because that doesn't sound good or it doesn't sound right. But I think some expectation of equivocation is accepted on dumb things."

"I'm just going to 'check this box'...and if I'm 70% accurate—that's good enough to 1) keep my guys out of trouble and 2) keep my boss out of trouble so we can keep doing good things for the country."

"I falsified the [traumatic brain injury] report that changed a distance from the IED strike [to where] one person was standing. So that way someone didn't come back down and stick a finger in my CO's chest and say, "You need to evac that lieutenant right now!" Because in the middle of [a] RIP [a relief in place, where an outgoing officer is training his or her replacement], that's not going to happen. If I do that, I'm going to put my boys in bags because they don't have any leadership. That ain't happening. I owe the parents of this country more than that."

"It's odd that in situations that I've been in, it's never been blatant self-interest. It's never been, 'I'm going to get this money so I can buy myself two couches for my office while I'm in Afghanistan.' [Instead], it's always like—for us, it was hard as hell to get water heaters. For some reason we could not get hot showers for our soldiers. It wasn't CERP money, but we had to finagle God-knows-how-many organizations to finally get these things and we had to say we're using this for this, when in fact it was so our guys could have hot showers when they get back off patrol. The truth of the matter is that, at the level that we're at, a lot of times we gotta get it done and we're going to find a way to do it."

"I think a real danger—since it's unsaid and it's not out there— is [that] we're requiring every single person at every single level to make their own determination on what they want to lie about. Because we're all setting a

different standard and because we can't talk about it, we're obviously going to have the potential for the guys who take it too far."

"I think the reason why we have an easier time accepting that CERP money might be used by people falsely is because you look at the institutional Army and see all the fraud, waste, and abuse that happens at every level."

"You're a bad leader and you failed if you didn't get everyone through the hour-long human trafficking thing. All the other company commanders in the United States Army somehow managed to do it and you're gonna be the only guy that didn't do it because you [truthfully] reported 85%."

"We're all kind of vultures. The one guy [who told the truth] – get him. He exposed himself. And no one wants to stand out. We all see reductions are being made. If you're looking to do this [stay in the Army] for a long period of time, your intent is to appease the person above you. Just like the person you're appeasing made that decision a long time ago."

"It's getting to the point where you're almost rewarded for being somebody you're not. That's a dangerous situation especially now as we downsize. We're creating an environment where everything is too rosy because everyone is afraid to paint the true picture. You just wonder where it will break, when it will fall apart."