



A Few Ways to Avoid Moral Injury



SGM Mike Vining @ Blasting Through Official 
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When I arrived at the 99th Ordnance Detachment (EOC) Phuoc Vinh, Vietnam, I was 19 years old. An EOD incident came in, and the Senior Supervisor (E-8) assigned the mission to a SSG and a Specialist. It was a fly out to support infantry on the ground.

The Specialist had a premonition and asked not to go.

After a few rounds of debate, the Supervisor relented and assigned another EOD tech to go in his place. I observed all of this and thought about it. I would never let someone take my place on a mission, even if I had a premonition that something bad was going to happen.

I knew that I wouldn't be able to stand myself if I had a premonition about a mission, asked to be reassigned, and the person who took my place was

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In 1970, there was no concept of moral injury. But as I look back, on some level, I realized that I could prevent feeling awful about a mission if I stuck to my personal code of ethics.

There are many types of moral injury that I would learn about later for which I had no control. But I could control my personal ethics. I prevented my suffering of one cause of moral injury because I stuck to my own moral compass. I had promised myself back in 1970 that I would never say no to a mission. I kept that promise to myself. No one would ever take my place.

Consequently, this was one type of moral injury I was able to avoid.

I also avoided some moral injury by sticking to safety protocols that I absolutely would not breach, no matter who was asking me to do a task that wasn't safe. I had a client who wanted to glissade down a slope after summiting Gannett Peak in Wyoming. I told him that it wasn't safe. It was too steep. When I could see a better angle and the slope at the bottom flattened out, I allowed him to go for it.


Can you imagine the moral injury I would have had if I had allowed him to glissade down that steep slope and he died because of it?

I have turned around plenty of times on a mountain. The mountain is always there. Getting to the top of a mountain is optional. Getting down is mandatory. An ascent doesn't count unless you get down. It's said, "So and so conquered a mountain." Nope. In reality, the mountain let you that day. No one ever conquers a mountain. You have to decide whether you will respect that mountain. If you don't, it will kill you. So, sometimes, you have to say, "Yes, that's my job, and I will do it well because it's within my moral compass and within my safety knowledge and commitment." And sometimes, you have to say, "Nope, I'm not doing that job because it's not ethical. It goes against who I am as a person."

I lost one of my closest friends due to a safety issue that was ignored. Chuck Chase was crushed by a forklift driver who was new to the job, not trained, and did not hold a forklift license. That forklift driver should have refused to

get on that forklift without proper training. He should have said, “No, that’s not my job, not until I’m trained properly.” Tragedy happens when you don’t follow your own set of personal rules and when you don’t follow safety procedures.

I'm SGM Mike Vining, and I urge you to maintain strong ethics and practice safety to avoid this kind of moral injury. You'll thank your future self.

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SGM Mike Vining, Delta Force, shares elite ops leadership lessons, mountaineering, & inspiring truths that combat moral injury. "Blasting Through" book, Aug '26

