

## The Soldier's Dilemma

During the Vietnam War, an infantry squad was patrolling deep in enemy-controlled territory near the Cambodian border. At one point in this operation, the squad leader, Sergeant Johnson, decided to scout along a trail that ran through a valley leading toward a village a short distance away. Johnson told one of his rifleman, a private named Dillon, to stay on a small hilltop as a lookout while the rest of the squad followed along the trail in the valley below. Johnson expressed concern about a possible ambush on the trail and reminded Dillon that their platoon had been ambushed in this same area and had suffered a number of casualties some weeks prior to the present operation. "Don't take any chances," Johnson warned. "Better to kill a few of those murdering villagers than to let any more Americans die."

As Dillon watched the squad make its way along the trail, he saw a Vietnamese woman suddenly appear on the trail just ahead of the squad, but around the bend so they could not see her. From his vantage point, the woman appeared to lean over the edge of the trail and then quickly moved back into the underbrush—out of sight of the squad, but still visible to Dillon.

Dillon was immediately suspicious. This was enemy controlled territory, and the woman could easily be part of the local guerilla forces. On the other hand, many innocent peasants lived in and around the village. Was the woman a guerrilla soldier who might set off a mine or booby trap when the squad came around the bend in the trail? Or was the woman simply a peasant who had perhaps dropped something on the trail in her haste to hide from the advancing American soldiers? Also, what about the things Johnson had told him? As a soldier, he was taught to obey all orders of his superiors. To disobey is a crime.

As these thoughts went through Dillon's mind, the squad kept moving and now was almost at the spot where the woman was hiding. The squad was too far away for Dillon to call out to them. Even a warning shot would probably not stop them from proceeding around the bend. Dillon raised his rifle and lined up his sights on the woman in the brush. But as his finger tightened on the trigger, he hesitated.

If he shot the woman and there turned out not to be a mine or booby trap on the trail, he would have murdered an innocent person. But if he didn't shoot her, a number of his friends might be blown to bits if the woman detonated a mine.

### Questions:

What should Dillon do: hold his fire or shoot the woman?

Why is that the right thing for him to do?

Do you agree with what Sergeant Johnson told Dillon? Why or why not?

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