



FRIENDLY FIRE

What role did decision errors play in the death of Patrick Tillman?

Patrick Tillman was no ordinary American football player. He excelled at the game, playing as a defensive lineman for Arizona State University, then later as a professional for the Arizona Cardinals. At the height of his career, just months after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, Tillman turned down a three-year contract offer from the Cardinals so that he could join the U.S. Army. He completed his basic training and eventually found himself in Afghanistan, fighting the Taliban. Patrick Tillman was killed there on April 22, 2004, but not by the Taliban; rather, he was killed by members of his own squadron.

U.S. Department of Defense officials refer to episodes in which an active engagement has occurred between units on the same side in terms of an oxymoron—they call it friendly fire. The Pentagon estimates that friendly fire accounted for 16 percent of all U.S. deaths in World War II, 14 percent in the Vietnam War, and 23 percent in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Although each case of friendly fire has its own underlying causes, two general reasons for these tragedies account for a majority of the cases: (1) targeting errors, in which the target is correctly identified as the enemy and the fire inadvertently contacts a friendly target, and (2) identification errors, in which the fire is precise, but the target has been misidentified as the enemy.

Targeting errors may be caused by many factors that result in an action that was planned appropriately but did not end well. In many ways, targeting errors are similar to the unintended acceleration errors that were discussed in the “The Farmers’ Market” in chapter 1. In these episodes, it is clear that the driver intended to contact the brake, but for whatever reason, the foot pressed the accelerator instead. Friendly fire targeting errors are similar—the intended target was identified correctly, but for whatever reason, the fire was misguided. The reasons the actions and movements become misguided are varied, and several of them are discussed later (e.g., in “The Gimme Putt” in chapter 3).

Identification errors are probably the more tragic of these two types that result in friendly fire, because the action was performed as intended, but the friendly target was incorrectly identified as the enemy. We make decisions of this general type many times each day. They are called binary decisions because we must decide between one of two available choices. Like the ones in combat (shoot/don’t shoot), binary decisions are usually of the “yes or no” type. Do we have enough time to make a left-hand turn before the

oncoming car arrives? Does the shadow on this X-ray indicate a cancerous growth, or is it just “noise”? Should the quarterback run with the football or throw it? Binary decisions are the result of an accumulation of information that leads a person to choose one option over another.

Although we make binary decisions like these all the time, very rarely are they made under conditions of heightened arousal such as the ones experienced by armed personnel in combat, and these conditions vastly increase the likelihood of making incorrect decisions. In the next story (“Method to His Bratness”), I discuss the binary decision-making process in more detail, including two fundamental reasons why errors occur.

A decision error ended the life of Patrick Tillman. His unit was on a mission and had split into two groups. Contact was lost between the groups, and when they finally met on a road in Afghanistan, one group mistook the other for the enemy and initiated gunfire.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Define the term *friendly fire* in your own words. What other terms could be used to describe this concept?
2. What is the difference between a targeting error and an identification error?
3. Find more information about Patrick Tillman’s death. Why was an inspector general’s report issued on the matters related to his death?
4. Describe the difference between targeting errors and identification errors when using a handheld communication device such as a smartphone (e.g., iPhone, BlackBerry). How might you conduct an experiment to separate the influence of screen and keyboard features on these two types of errors?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Friendly fire. (2009, May 14). In *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/friendly_fire.

Inspector General, U.S.D.O.D. (2007). *Review of matters related to the death of Corporal Patrick Tillman, U.S. Army*. Report # IPO2007E001.

Pat Tillman. (2009, May 14). In *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/pat_tillman.

Reason, J. (1990). *Human error*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tillman, M., & Zacchino, N. (2008). *Boots on the ground by dusk: My tribute to Pat Tillman*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press.

U.S. Department of Defense. (2010, December 27). Department of defense dictionary. www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary.