



Character

Since the beginning of time, warfare has demanded a depth of character. Those who could reach within themselves and draw upon an internal strength have always carried the day against those of lesser character. When the battlefield is chaotic, full of confusion, and horror is all about, it is those who have taken care to build their character who emerge victorious. Cowardliness in one's character with respect to integrity and honor will sooner or later manifest itself as cowardliness in other forms. Those who commit to having the courage to face up to the ethical challenges in their daily lives will find that same courage can be drawn upon in times of great stress...in times of battle.

So, what of your character? Who are you...no, not the physical and superficial image...but *who are you really?* What do

you stand for? What is the *essence of your character?*

Every day you make decisions. Every day life presents you with a certain amount of time and a new and different set of circumstances. How you fill that time and deal with those circumstances are key to your character development. Quite simply, you are the one who defines who you are and who you will be. You decide your own character. Only you can, through your daily decisions, become a person of honor, of courage, of commitment.

Some of us come from backgrounds where these kinds of values have been reinforced since childhood. Others came to the Corps with little or no encouragement in such matters. Some were even raised in environments hostile to such ideals. But that was yesterday. Our character depends on the

way we face today and look at tomorrow. Life will bring us ups and downs that often are beyond our control. When faced with these situations, it is the action we take that contributes to the definition of our true character.

The fact that you have chosen to be a United States Marine speaks highly of your personal goals. You could have chosen another path. You certainly could have found an easier one. But you didn't. You chose to be one of the few, the proud, the Marines, to serve in an organization whose core values are honor, courage, and commitment. You knew it would be tough, but faced the challenge head on. And you continue to face the challenge of living up to those ideals every day.

When you tell someone that you are a United States Marine, they generally form a mental picture. They see a warrior whose discipline and combat skills make a fierce and tenacious fighter. They see one of America's finest...fit, standing erect, and in an immaculate uniform. And they see someone of honor, someone in whom to trust the future of their nation.

What causes this image of us to be so identical in so many people's eyes? Why do they think of us the way they do? For 221 years we have taken the young men and women of America and forged them into Marines. Those who have gone before have left us a legacy. The preeminence of honor in their lives and in their conduct as Marines became their hallmark. They displayed exceptional courage, one of the characteristics most associated with Marines. And their commitment to the ideals of our nation, to the preservation of freedom at any price, and to one another is ingrained in our very ethos. The legacy we have been left by those Marines of yesteryear is the strong and respected character of our Corps.

Just as the Marines before us built the character of our Corps, your individual character is now in a state of construction. Choose carefully the blocks with which you build. Such things as honesty and trustworthiness are solid blocks and can be depended on as a firm foundation. Upon these can be built other positive traits such as loyalty and dependability.

There is help available in this construction process. Active participation in your faith can strengthen the decision-making process that leads to the right decisions when you are faced with tough choices. Maintenance of your whole self—body, mind, and spirit—gives you self-confidence. The associations you keep, the peers you choose, the mentors you seek, and the organizations you affiliate with—all can have an influence on your character.

Living by our institutional motto can also be a very positive part of who you are as an individual. *Semper Fidelis...Always Faithful*. Is the *Always Faithful* trait in your character? Are you faithful...faithful to your country, to your Corps, to your fellow Marines, to your spouse and to your word? Faithfulness is yet another solid building block for your character.

There are negative traits you can choose to include in your character as well. Immoral conduct. Unfaithfulness. Violent or abusive behavior. Laziness. Criminal tendencies. When you deliberately allow one of these traits to become part of your character, it can start you down the road to destruction. All too often, however, we begin in a

more subtle way. We do it by not deciding with conviction to make the right choices. If honesty and faithfulness become traits that are exhibited on a situational basis, then we invariably find these traits being displayed less and less frequently. They begin to disappear from our character because we never purposefully committed to them. You must identify those traits that you wish to have as a permanent part of your character and firmly decide that they are non-negotiable.

Then there are the character destroyers. Drugs steal your freedom of choice and your ability to decide rationally the issues that define your character. Alcohol abuse breaks individuals down, piece by piece, until their character fades and they lose the distinguishing features of the person they really would like to be.

Character. It is based on decisions, on your own decisions. It is based on the decisions that you think out and on those that you fail to think out. You can build your character, or you can destroy it. Self-examination, a good honest look inward, is the first step toward building a strong character. Decide on those traits that you want most to be your own, characteristics like honor, courage, and commitment. Then live by that decision.

In the conflicts to come, to which our nation will send her Marines, we anticipate a chaotic and lethal battlefield. You, the individual Marine, may be called upon to make important decisions in a very unstructured and dangerous environment. Will you have the depth of character to deal with the situation effectively? Will you have shunned the temptation of situational ethics and made hard choices about always doing the right thing? Is that part of your character? If so, you will be able to draw upon those strengths and carry the day. The character you build today will be your foundation for success when facing the difficulties of tomorrow.

Remember my words from the Commandant's Planning Guidance, "I expect Marines to epitomize that which is good about our nation and to personify the ideals upon which it was founded. I do not intend for 'honor,' 'courage,' and 'commitment' to be just words; I expect them to frame the way we live and act as Marines. There is no room in the Marine Corps for situational ethics or situational morality; those found wanting will be held accountable."

So, when you look at yourself, what does come to mind? What are the strengths, the traits, you want in your character? Have you really thought about it? If not, it's time.



C. C. Krulak
General, U.S. Marine Corps
Commandant of the Marine Corps