

Character, Redemption, and Resiliency

A holistic look at leadership

by LtCol Rob Warfield, USMC(Ret)

It is time to face reality. My time as an active duty Marine has come to its end. I have been the most fortunate of Marines, having started as private in 1990 to retire as a lieutenant colonel in 2018. Over almost 28 years of service, I have been privileged to have worked with and lead some of the best warriors our country has to offer. With that said, this journey has not been without trials and tribulations that have tested my faith in my Corps and myself. What I am going to offer, through this article, are leadership observations that I have learned over the test of time. I am not going to regurgitate the Marine Corps leadership traits and principles but take a more holistic

>LtCol Warfield was a Logistics Officer (0402/8041) with almost 28 years of leadership experience. He served and led Marines (in and outside his MOS) at nearly every level in the Operating Forces and the Supporting Establishment. He last served as the Director, Marine Corps Community Services, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, CA, and retired from active duty on 30 June 2018.

look at leadership through the lens of character, redemption, and resiliency.

As I thought about this article and what I wanted to write about, I determined that what separates our Corps from the other warfighting organizations is character. This character is not just made up of courage and tenacity but, more importantly, is composed of

intangible values such as faith, *esprit de corps*, and calling. These intangible values are the essence of a United States Marine. They are intricately linked to warfighting prowess and are of critical importance in the operating environment of today.

Pillars of Character

This environment is becoming increasingly complex and violent. It demands that leaders, at every rank, have the capability to make decisions at the tactical and operational level that may have influence at the strategic level. To make these decisions requires leaders to be men and women of exemplary character. Their character must be grounded in faith (moral, spiritual, and temporal) as well as a belief in their fellow Marines and leaders, and they must have a calling for service. These three pillars (faith, belief, and calling) form the core of a Marine's character and are a base for that Marine's "Well of Fortitude" (WoF).¹ The WoF nurtures and sustains a Marine through times of adversity where his character is tested, but the WoF is not bottomless. It must be refilled on occasion with conviction, *esprit de corps*, and passion.



Intangible values are the essence of a Marine's character. (Photo by Sgt Averi Coppa.)

These elements cultivate and nourish the Marine's character and give balance to actions and decisions.

It is important to spend a little time on the pillars of character. Each pillar is dependent on the other for strength and endurance. Will there be times when one pillar may be stronger than another? Of course, but over the span of time, this will change and balance will be restored. Of the three pillars, faith may be the critical link in providing strength to the others. Faith does not just refer to

this strength while conducting combat operations in Iraq. Marines moved into the attack without question and with steadfast purpose, knowing that their brother Marines were by their side to provide strength and protection like the shields of the Spartan warriors.

The final pillar is the calling. The calling is what brings each new recruit into the recruiting office. Our Marine Corps does not promise anything except hard training, danger, and the possibility of glory. This means that something

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religion (although that is an important part); it refers to existential belief in the righteousness of purpose. For Marines, the righteousness of purpose springs from their upbringing, friends, societal influences, religious faith, and the core values of the Marine Corps. Each of these influences drives and guides Marines as they do their duties. Moreover, this righteousness of purpose is an intangible value from the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. These documents provide the basis of purpose and add their own substance to the Marine's WoF.

In this complex world, the environment is challenging and dangerous. For a Marine to thrive in this environment, belief is essential. This belief requires the Marine to have faith that his senior leadership is also made up of men and women of exemplary character who will not squander their efforts or lives in pursuit of worthless or questionable objectives. He must further believe that the Marines to his left and right have the same level of commitment he does. An excellent example of this concept is the Spartan phalanx. Each Spartan warrior's shield provided protection to the Spartan next to him; thereby the strength of phalanx is the belief in the warrior next to you.² I have witnessed

has driven each person into the office to ask for the chance to earn the title of Marine. Over my time in our Corps, I have heard this calling referred to as the "wearing of the cloth." It is an almost spiritual calling to service synonymous with a knight called to serve during the Crusades. This calling, for Marines, is the desire to serve their country and community by dedicating their lives to a higher purpose. The importance of the calling cannot be overlooked or minimized. Each new recruit has answered a call to the "cloth" as a chance to serve their Nation and fellow man. This is a quality often disregarded in a societal environment that places individual goals and satisfaction ahead of the Nation or community.

Redemption

There is an adage that I read once that stated: "To err is human, to forgive, divine; however neither of which is Marine Corps policy." The next part of this article was the most difficult to write. It required me to conduct an assessment of not just myself but our Corps through a personal and professional lens. I wanted to determine if some of my beliefs regarding personal and professional redemption were grounded in justice and reality and not emotion and

bitterness toward leadership. From this assessment, I have determined a couple of things:

- There is personal redemption in our Corps. Leaders must be able to forgive themselves for decisions or actions that turned out to be mistakes. A Marine will only be on active duty for a finite period of time; then he will go back into the civilian world. The Marine must be able to forgive himself in order to avoid having his world colored by bitterness and anger. The realization is that nobody other than the Marine, his family, and his friends, is going to care about him. The Marine Corps certainly will not care, so the Marine must be able to accept and forgive himself. This is easier said than done. I have spent many sleepless nights reviewing, analyzing, and dissecting decisions and recommendations I have made in the past; I still do it.

- There is no professional redemption in our Marine Corps. This is a bold statement, but it is the absolute truth. The Marine Corps does not forgive or forget; and it holds a grudge. This is demonstrated by the paragraph in every promotion or command slating board—guidance that tells board members not to disregard records that are less than perfect. This leads to the question: If boards are directed not to disregard less-than-perfect records, how many less-than-perfect records ever get promoted or slated for command? I do not know the answer to that question, but I imagine that the answer is close to zero in each area. I have asked this question of senior Marines who have served on boards, and the answer that I have received is this: "We do consider those types of records, but in the end, they just do not compete with the perfect record." Once a Marine has fallen (through his own mistakes or otherwise) from the "perfect path," there is no way to professionally redeem himself in the eyes of HQMC. The officer will never be given the opportunity to help junior officers avoid the pitfall through the privilege of command.

- There is atonement in personal redemption, but there is no atonement

in professional redemption. Personal atonement is always going to be in the eye of the individual Marine and how that Marine responds to the adversity presented, but professional atonement will never be achieved. I think an excellent example of this is demonstrated in the story of Task Force Violence. This unit was thrown out of Afghanistan after being falsely accused of committing a war crime during a complex ambush. In the end, this team worked to clear their names and restore their reputations through hard work and legal proceedings. These Marines have had marginal success, but they will never be able to regain their reputations or their confidence in our Marine Corps.

Resilient Character

Being a leader of Marines requires a resilient character. It is tied very closely to redemption and atonement, and it provides the source of sustain-

ment (WoF) for a warrior of character. The resiliency of a leader's character can be synonymous with the Spartan warrior's shield. It protects the warrior by deflecting or absorbing blows and attacks. I also believe that this shield is a source of strength for the warrior. It grows stronger when the WoF is full and sustains this strength. Ultimately, the sustaining force for this "shield of resiliency" is selflessness—the belief in each other, our mission, and our calling to serve. Warriors of character

do not let adversity define them. They find resilience by moving towards a goal beyond themselves, transcending pain and grief by perceiving bad times as a temporary state of affairs ... It's possible to strengthen your inner self and your belief in yourself, to define yourself as capable and competent.³

Further, the resiliency of a warrior's character is sustained through the following traits:

- The ability to use past triumphs as a guide to attack potential adversity. Remembering how adversity was confronted and subdued during past trials is incredibly powerful when being challenged by new ordeals.
- Having a strong belief in yourself and your purpose. This belief provides a potent power to strengthen resolve and righteousness of purpose.
- Marine leaders must be bold in action and demonstrate an ability to adapt; when faced with difficult situations that are fraught with adversity or peril, a Marine leader must be resolute in the determination to act and, more importantly, adapt as the situation changes. By doing this, the leader builds resilience not just in himself but in the Marines around him.
- Marines must have a sense of humor and be able to laugh at themselves. There is power in laughter as a tactic to oppose stress and strengthen resiliency.

Call For Papers

Marine Corps University and the Marine Corps Association & Foundation are pleased to announce a call for papers on a topic that is vitally important for our country and the Navy-Marine Corps Team. The contest challenges participants to think holistically about how our Nation employs naval expeditionary power now and in the future operating environment.

Essay Topic

Within the context of rapidly changing strategic, operational, and technological environments, how must the traditional concepts of naval expeditionary operations be adapted and expanded to be successful in the future?



Essays should be at least 1500 but no more than 3000 words in length. Essays are due by 15 February 2019 and must be submitted via email to Ms. Angela Anderson, Senior Editor, Marine Corps University Press at angela.anderson@usmcu.edu. Winners will be announced in April 2019.

Prizes

Overall Winning Essay

Invitation to attend the Annual Symposium of the National Museum of the Pacific War, Fredericksburg, Texas in September 2019.

Winning Essay in Each Category

- Cash award and plaque provided by the Marine Corps Association & Foundation
- Publication in *Leatherneck*, *Marine Corps Gazette*, or *Marine Corps History*
- Award presentation at a Marine Corps University Lecture Series Event

Two Honorable Mentions in Each Category with a cash award provided by the Marine Corps Association & Foundation.

Contest Categories and Eligibility

- Active Duty and Reserve E5 & Below
- Active Duty and Reserve E6 & Above
- Active Duty and Reserve O3 & Below
- Active Duty and Reserve O4 & Above





The leader's character and warrior's ethos must be resolute in the face of peril and adversity.
(Photo by Sgt Averi Coppa.)

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Decision making is a part of resilient character. Steven Pressfield touches on this in *The Warrior Ethos* when he states:

What he says and does can save (or cost) his own life or the lives his brothers. The nineteen year old squad leader and the twenty-three year old lieutenant often exercise more power (and in spheres of greater and more instant consequence) than their fathers, who are fifty and have been working honorable and diligently their entire lives.⁴

These decisions and recommendations come with a cost that can have devastating consequences and drain the WoF (temporarily or permanently). Imagine an officer who has to make a decision that will knowingly cost the lives of his Marines. The accomplishment of the mission requires this decision. The officer is going to have to live with the consequences of this decision for the rest of his life. Then, imagine the officer who has to make a difficult personnel decision that deals with the potential ending of another officer's career. This decision can be just as devastating as the combat decision. This calling to be a leader of Marines is a task that is filled with terrifying excitement, terrifying depression, and doubts of decisions made. Building and sustaining the resiliency of character in not just ourselves, but also in our Marines, may

be the most difficult part of leading Marines.

A Final Word

As I leave active duty, I am comfortable with who I am and the decisions that I have made (good and bad), and my integrity is intact. I always fostered a leadership environment and culture that promoted character, sustained courage, and encouraged my Marines to do the right thing rather than always being right (there is a difference). I have observed some of the best and worst leaders in our Corps, I have seen tremendously selfless acts, and I have witnessed narcissism at its worst. But I am hopeful for the future of our Corps.

There is a moral obligation to leadership. As leaders of Marines, we must continue to push, innovate, and inspire those Marines whom we are privileged to lead. This is a tremendous and solemn responsibility. It comes with great hazards that encompass not just physical aspects but also moral and ethical one. The consequences for failure or decision making are lethal in the physical sense and also career-wise when, incorrect decisions are made for the right reasons. The leader's character and warrior's ethos must be resolute in the face of peril and adversity. This is what the calling demands. We, as leaders, have a moral obligation to be warriors of character.

Notes

1. David A. Grossman, *On Killing*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996); Brian McCoy, *The Passion of Command*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 2007).
2. Steven Pressfield, *The Warriors Ethos*, (Los Angeles, CA: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011).
3. Brad Waters and Hara Estroff Marano, "10 Traits of Emotionally Resilient People," *Psychology Today*, (Blog: 21 May 2018).
4. *The Warrior Ethos*.



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