

From Character to Courage

The importance of spirituality in maximizing combat readiness and warfighter resiliency of Marines in the 21st century

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“There is no substitute for the spiritual in war.”¹

—Gen J.A. Lejeune

In his article, “From Character to Courage: Developing the Spirit of the 21st Century Warfighter,” the Chaplain of the Marine Corps, RADM Gregory N. Todd, asserts that “spiritual fitness [is] a critical aspect of readiness.”² He explains that readiness “is the heart of the spiritual fitness effort in the Marine Corps—preparing the warrior for today’s competition and any future conflict.”³ The article argues that spirituality is a vital component of character development that demands the same intentionality and focus by leaders as mental, social, or physical fitness do.⁴ Todd writes that character, as it relates to spirituality, is “such a critical element of combat success that all leaders must deliberately approach character development as integral to combat readiness.”⁵ His article also serves as a reminder of the vital role and place that spiritual fitness plays in character development and combat readiness of Marines.⁶ As such, Chaplain Todd’s article echoes principles that are deeply embedded within the DNA of the Marine Corps. This fact is underscored by consecutive ALMARs on resilience and spirituality by the 37th and 38th CMCs as well as doctrinal publications speaking on this topic. These official pronouncements are all rooted in one of the

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oldest truths of the Marine Corps: *there is no substitute for the spiritual in war.*⁷ Notwithstanding this continuity with authoritative guidance and received wisdom, Chaplain Todd’s position has been the subject of controversy.⁸ Nonetheless, this article continues the discussion by considering the value, role, and place of spirituality in the Marine Corps within the context of the 21st century.⁹

Accordingly, we begin with a brief discussion of the two recent ALMARs on spirituality as well as an overview of the Marine Corps’ main publications pertaining to spirituality or spiritual fitness. Following this, we recommend how current Marine Corps leaders can approach spiritual fitness as a basic component of resiliency that strengthens force readiness and warfighting capabilities. This section will focus on practical ways leaders can implement spiritual fitness training within their units to develop the moral character of Marines. Because one of the practical avenues is how to use chaplains effectively, this section will touch upon the proper role of Professional Naval Chaplaincy in the development of Marine Corps character, as it pertains to spiritual fitness.¹⁰ This article concludes that as the age of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), Distributed Maritime Opera-

tions (DMO), and near-peer warfare surfaces and unfolds, commanders must successfully implement spiritual fitness training within their units to maximize combat readiness, warfighter resiliency, and the tactical proficiency of Marines in the 21st century.

“Regardless of individual philosophy or beliefs, spiritual well-being makes us better warriors and people of character capable of making good choices on and off duty.”¹¹

—Gen R.B. Neller

When Gen Lejeune made his famous statement, “*there is no substitute for the spiritual in war*,” he was essentially restating what had been understood by the greatest military leaders throughout the history of human conflict.¹² When spirituality is afire within a unit, those in it will work hard, suffer long, and even lay down their lives in combat, should it

be required.¹³ Gen Lejeune thus believed that spirituality was essential to winning battles. Carry on this tradition to the present day, the Marine Corps continues to espouse the vital importance of spiritual fitness to combat readiness and resiliency.¹⁴ Indeed, consecutive ALMARs on the matter by both Gen Robert B. Neller and Gen David H. Berger attest to the enduring importance of spiritual fitness.¹⁵ In this regard, the 37th CMC embraced spiritual fitness as essential to both the well-being of individual Marines as well as the Marine Corps as a whole.¹⁶ As well, in his 2016 ALMAR, Gen Neller stated that “[r]esearch indicates spiritual fitness plays a key role in resiliency, in our ability to grow, develop, recover, heal, and adapt. Regardless of individual philosophy or beliefs, spiritual well-being makes us better warriors and people of character capable of making good choices on and off duty.”¹⁷ For his part, Gen Berger echoes his predecessor on the importance of spirituality and builds upon Gen Neller’s statements in his own 2020 ALMAR on resiliency and spiritual fitness. In speaking on the notion of spiritual fitness as a component of character development, he emphasized the importance of “leaders at every level to communicate the importance of faith, values and moral living inside the Marine Corps culture of fitness.”¹⁸ In sum, it is significant that both CMCs are united in their fundamental messaging on the importance of spirituality within the Marine Corps. In addition, they do this not by pushing out a program but rather by emphasizing spiritual fitness as an engagement strategy for leaders at every level.¹⁹ This is noteworthy in that both Commandants signal their intention that spiritual fitness should be considered on the same level of importance within the Marine Corps as mental and physical fitness.

Keeping this in mind, Chaplain Todd’s article cannot be regarded as a mere paean to spirituality, calling for some type of chaplain-led spiritual fitness program to be implemented in the Marine Corps and imposed on Marines.²⁰ Rather, his article is a critical reminder to leaders of the historical and timeless role that spirituality plays in warfighter development.²¹ Furthermore,

while not excluding the components of God and religion, spiritual fitness in RADM Todd’s article is oriented toward the broadly conceived definition adopted by the Marine Corps.²² This conception is articulated clearly in the *Spiritual Fitness Notebook*, which notes that “[s]piritual fitness is a component of overall fitness within Marine Leader Development. It is the role of every Marine leader to develop future leaders who are mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually fit. Chaplains work alongside to give voice in this endeavor, but they are NOT the owners of spiritual fitness.”²³ Substantively, the Marine Corps is aligned with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other Services in its approach to spiritual fitness.²⁴

To be clear, the role and importance of spiritual fitness in character development are grounded in *Marine Corps Order 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*.²⁵ MCO 1500.61 states that, as found within one of the six functional areas of Marine character development, leaders are to focus training and their coaching/counseling sessions on “Fitness”—to include “[p]hysical, mental, spiritual, and social health and well-being.”²⁶ In so doing, leaders are ensuring the formation of “holistic well-being, boost[ing] morale, cohesiveness, and resiliency—enabling Marines to execute the toughest challenges and recuperate in a shorter time,”²⁷ and are advancing official resiliency initiatives.²⁸ That is to say, the current Marine Corps leadership engagement strategy relating to resiliency and spiritual fitness falls under the auspices of the Human Performance Office in Quantico, VA.²⁹ Established in 2020, the Human Performance Office’s mission is to conduct “service-level coordination of human performance and resiliency policies and programs to enable the achievement of the Training and Education Command (TECOM) mission to train and educate the force.”³⁰ It views and leverages spiritual fitness as a subset of resiliency, alongside mental and social fitness.³¹ The Human Performance Office’s official stance demonstrates that the Marine Corps sees spirituality as a resilience component standing in equal value alongside mental and physical resilience.³² Accordingly,

the *Spiritual Fitness Leaders Guide Notebook* stipulates that “[s]piritual fitness is a component of overall fitness within Marine Leader Development.”³³ As such, “[i]t is the role of every Marine leader to develop future leaders who are mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually fit.”³⁴ Indeed, “fitness” within the Marine Corps is best understood as “a total concept” approach with spiritual fitness as one of several components aimed at promoting resiliency and wellbeing. In the end, the Corps has “a holistic approach to physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness. Truly ‘fit’ Marines have far more than just high Physical Fitness Test and Combat Fitness Test scores. Ensuring holistic wellbeing boosts morale, cohesiveness, and resiliency—enabling Marines to execute the toughest challenges and recuperate in shorter time.”³⁵

As the DOD wrestles with Force Design and incorporates new technologies into viable warfighting concepts and strategies, spiritual resilience can-

“To ensure the continued health of our collective character and identity and maintain our reputation as elite warriors, I am reaffirming the importance of spiritual fitness. ... In addition to serving as models for their subordinates, leaders must champion efforts to instill spiritual fitness in order to advance character development across the Marine Corps and in support of my CPG.”³⁶

—Gen D.H. Berger

not be considered an outdated afterthought from a bygone era of warfare. While many agree that mental and physical fitness are indicators of warfighter readiness and resilience, much less attention and focus have been paid to the critical importance of spiritual fitness. Uniformed leadership at all levels have a vested interest in utilizing force multipliers to prepare and enhance their warfighting personnel assets to handle the human stress factors associated with combat inasmuch as they emphasize tactical proficiency and professional knowledge of various combat domains. Simply put, a warfighter who is more resilient is more hardened against the human stress factors of war and thus is more disciplined in their craft, adaptable to all conditions, and proficiently lethal. Shaping an operational mindset and readiness posture for spiritual resiliency and toughness responds to the anti-access/area denial and EABO conceptual challenge: *how U.S. forces perform defending U.S. vital interests in the future depends upon how we think, invest, and prepare today.*

As America prepares for an era marked by renewed great power competitions and a new technological generation of warfare, many lessons learned during the preceding two decades will simply not apply to future combat. America will no longer have an overmatch against near-peer competitors and will be at a disadvantage in some domains. Engaging in kinetic warfare with strategic competitors has the potential to produce mass casualties hitherto unseen since the days of World War II and the Korean War, disproportionate to what was experienced during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Facing the potential for horrific casualties and an uncertain advantage in a military engagement against a peer competitor, the importance of spiritual fitness cannot be relegated to a leader's back burner. Nor should spiritual fitness be relegated to a DOD policy or program that becomes part of an annual training requirement—another General Military Training or PowerPoint brief where the training requirement is meant, the box checked, and the topic of spiritual resiliency relegated to the dustbin

for another year. This would surely signal the death of meaningful dialog and honest spiritual introspection, growth, and hardening. However, incremental touchpoints along a service member's career would be a solid foundation from which to better develop spiritual resilience. Spiritual resilience education needs to be integrated into Officer Candidate School, boot camp, Career Level Professional Military Education, Staff Academy, and the Commander's Course. However, spiritual reliance should not be addressed as a separate topic for individual contemplation but rather as a component that reinforces our core values and the responsibilities of commissioned and noncommissioned officers assume as they progress through their careers. Spiritual resilience, core values, and leadership should form the virtuous cycle that serves as the foundation of leadership within the Marine Corps.³⁷

To achieve spiritual fitness that supports unit and personal purpose, a warfighting spirit, and mental and physical toughness, unit commanders and leaders need to set a positive example and be willing to engage those in their charge about what is spirituality, how it has personally provided strength, and why it is an important facet of military service. Leaders need to be open and honest about their struggles as they relate to spirituality, the actions taken, and describe their ultimate successes and failures as a means to cultivate spiritual resilience in the Marines they lead. As a fighting force, America regularly prepares for and tests to physical standards, performs medical readiness checks, inspects physical material readiness, and evaluates tactical combat proficiency skills. But the warfighter is also a complete human—with mental and spiritual components—who needs to be spiritually prepared for the rigors of deployment cycles, kinetic combat, and eventual re-entry into society and family life.

The chaplain is the subject-matter expert on spirituality and possesses the programmatic and administrative oversight of the spiritual resilience programs on behalf of commanders. The Navy Chaplain Corps requires its accessions

to hold a master's degree in theology and possess at least three years of practical ministry in their faith prior to being considered a candidate for active duty. Many chaplains come into the Navy older and with more life experience than their rank would suggest to a concomitant line officer colleague. Chaplains and Religious Program Specialists form the core of command religious programs and religious ministry teams (RMTs). While many finely trained and adept chaplains oversee the spiritual resilience of their sailors and Marines, today's chaplains and commanders face the challenge of utilizing the limited resource of RMTs to maximize effect in DMO and EABO environments and operational forward-deployed force laydowns.

There are essentially three elements of tactical consternation to deploying a chaplain in DMO and EABO environments. First, at the command level in DMO and EABO tactical scenarios, there may be at any given time multiple lines of effort with smaller force projections augmenting a ship, MEU, or ashore components: Landing Craft Utility, Landing Craft Air Cushioned, V-22s, and UH-60s shuttling men and materials to and from the afloat and ashore units, force recon elements conducting forward intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions, infantry units securing landing zones, HIMARS batteries executing fire missions, and F-35B air defense penetration sorties flown all within a compressed time frame and over a large swath of the battlespace. All the while, there is only one or perhaps two RMTs from an afloat command to support such operations: one from the ship's company and one from the MEU's Battalion Landing Team, Combat Logistics Battalion, or CE. There simply are not enough RMTs to go around in such operations. The second element of RMT limitation shows itself in the aforementioned DMO and EABO scenarios from the logistical perspective of the desire to move the RMT about the battlespace. Can a commander reasonably spare a "Holy Helo" to ferry the RMT around amid a busy flight deck and the bustle of tactical operations ashore? Thirdly, and most importantly, the chaplain is uniquely trained and commissioned

for their job—no one else can offer religious services, have the utmost confidential counseling, and enable spiritual readiness like the chaplain can. So, in a kinetic environment, operating ashore or afloat far from reinforcements in an anti-access/area denial contested area it is reasonable to assume that if the chaplain is killed or wounded, there is no immediate replacement ready to fill that void at the command level. Hence, most commanders would likely be reticent to risk a fundamentally limited asset such as their chaplains by sending them ashore or sending them on “Holy Helo” rides in a DMO or EABO environment.³⁸

Thankfully, there is another tool in the spiritual resilience kit that can be leveraged in DMO and EABO environments to provide continued and sustained forward-deployed spiritual capability to strengthen and sustain the warfighter’s spirit: the lay leader. Lay leaders can be selected from servicemembers who exemplify spiritual toughness and can model and champion spiritual resiliency at the small-unit level while providing the limited religious services they are authorized to offer in disbursed and forward-deployed areas. The lay leader can act as an extension—albeit a limited extension—of the command RMT as a collateral responsibility without adding or subtracting from the risk factors associated with shuttling around a one-of-one chaplain in a kinetic environment or adding to logistical transportation congestion. The lay leader can reinforce the spiritual resiliency of their comrades-in-arms.

To be sure, the lay leader is not a substitute for the chaplain: they cannot provide counseling, they are limited in the scope of religious services by their religious organization and the chaplain’s oversight, and they usually do not possess the theological training and experience that the chaplain does.³⁹ However, the lay leader can add significant capability in the DMO and EABO environments and can communicate with the RMT as to the religious and spiritual needs of the sailors and Marines. If and when the chaplain and religious program specialist can move about the battlespace in a distributed forward area, it would be vital to have information from lo-

“During times of peace, the most important task of any military is to prepare for war. Through its preparedness, a military provides deterrence against potential aggressors. As the nation’s expeditionary force-in-readiness, the Marine Corps must maintain itself for immediate employment in “any clime and place” and in any type of conflict. All peacetime activities should focus on achieving combat readiness. This implies a high level of training, flexibility in organization and equipment, professional leadership, and a cohesive doctrine.”⁴⁰
—MCDP 1, Warfighting

cal company-grade leadership and their lay leaders exactly where that limited, one-of-one spiritual asset needs to go to address resiliency needs.

Since its inception in 1775, the Marine Corps has emphasized the importance of passing on professional knowledge to its members.⁴¹ RADM Todd’s “From Character to Courage” article follows suit with this time-honored convention in speaking to the importance of spiritual fitness. He is not so much breaking new ground as offering a timely reminder that spiritual fitness

is a part of the DNA of the Marine Corps’ vital component of character development and resiliency, tracing its roots to Gen Lejeune, and beyond to other military leaders throughout history. With the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* emphasizing the concepts of EABO, the Marine Corps now finds itself at an inflection point with its approach to spirituality. It is the spirit of the warfighter that makes them formidable, more so than the weapon they employ or the technology they bring to bear against the Nation’s enemies. For some time, there has been some inhibition in talking about the importance of spirituality and have instead turned to address the physical and mental concerns of our Marines. The coming conflicts will test our military in ways we may not fully understand at present. However, at the core of the conflict, our spirit must not falter. Warfighters are more than instruments and means to accomplish missions and operational objectives, bereft of mind and souls. Rather, a truly integrated and ready warfighter is one whose mind, body, and spirit are sharpened, honed, and prepared for the trials and challenges ahead of them and can forge the next generational global and strategic challenges into battlefield success: tactical victories and triumphs of the human spirit. In the past, spiritual fitness has been an oft-neglected component of resiliency. However, as the age of EABO and DMO dawns, it is more important than ever to implement spiritual fitness training within units to maximize combat readiness, warfighter resiliency, and the tactical proficiency of Marines in the 21st century.

Notes

1. Gen J.A. Lejeune, *The Reminiscences of a Marine* (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company, 1930).
2. RDMG G.N. Todd, “From Character to Courage: Developing the Spirit of the 21st Century Warfighter,” *Proceedings*, April 2021, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/april/character-courage-developing-spirit-21st-century-warfighter>.
3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. *The Reminiscences of a Marine*.
8. H.H. Seck "Group Threatens to Sue Over Corps' Spiritual Fitness Initiative," *Military.com*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/10/20/group-threatens-to-sue-over-corps-spiritual-fitness-initiative.html>.
9. Cf. D.A. Daigle & D.V. Goff, "Beyond Lawyer Assistance Programs: Applying the United States Marine Corps' Concepts and Principles of Spiritual Fitness as a Means toward Increasing the Health, Resiliency and Well-Being of Lawyers-While Restoring the Soul of the Profession," *The Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 59, no. 1 (2021).
10. Department of the Navy, *SECNAVINST 1730.7D* (Washington, DC: August 2008).
11. Gen R.B. Neller, *ALMAR 033/16*, (Washington, DC: October 2016).
12. See CDR Maurice A. Buford, "The Lejeune Ethical Arming Project (L.E.A.P.): Building Resilient Warriors in the Informational Age," *Marines*, n.d., [https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/61/Users/254/50/4350/Building%20Resilient%20Warriors%20in%20the%20information%20Age_The%20Lejeune%20Ethical%20Arming%20Project%20\(CH%20Buford\).pdf](https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/61/Users/254/50/4350/Building%20Resilient%20Warriors%20in%20the%20information%20Age_The%20Lejeune%20Ethical%20Arming%20Project%20(CH%20Buford).pdf).
13. Ibid.
14. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-10 Leading Marines* (Washington, DC: June 2016).
15. Gidget Fuentes, "What's the Commandant Talking About When He Says Marines Need to Be 'Spiritually' Fit?" *We Are the Mighty*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/articles/whats-the-commandant-talking-about-when-he-says-marines-need-to-be-spiritually-fit>.
16. Ibid; and *ALMAR 033/16*.
17. Ibid.
18. Gen David H Berger, *ALMAR 027/20, Resiliency and Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: December 2020).
19. See *Fuentes supra* note 15. See also, J. Schogol, "Spiritual Fitness' Not Just about God, Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Says," *Marine Corps Times*, November 27, 2017, www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2017/11/27/spiritual-fitness-not-just-about-god-sergeant-major-of-the-marine-corps-says.
20. Ibid; and Headquarters Marine Corps, *Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: May 2019). The potential misconception that the chaplain is in charge of spiritual fitness is addressed within this Marine Corps resource in the first entry under "Common Misconceptions."
21. "From Character to Courage."
22. Spiritual fitness can broadly be construed as that which connects with the transcendent and thereby increases the readiness, resiliency, and combat effectiveness of warfighters. Although there can be a religious aspect to spiritual fitness, it is a broader construct and is not limited to or constrained by religion in general. See e.g., D. Yeung, M.T. Martin, *Spiritual Fitness and Resilience: A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures, and Links to Well-Being* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2013). See also Staff, "QPME: Fitness for Marines," *Marine Corps University Research Library*, n.d., <https://grc-usmcu.libguides.com/pme/qpme/fitness-for-marines/spiritual-fitness>.
23. *Spiritual Fitness*.
24. The Marine Corps does not stand alone among the military services as to its beliefs on the value of spiritual fitness. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and other Services take a similar approach to spirituality and spiritual fitness. See Staff, Joint Chiefs Say Mind Body Spirit All Part of Total Force Fitness," *Health.mil*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.health.mil/News/Articles/2020/01/07/Joint-Chiefs-say-mind-body-spirit-all-part-of-Total-Force-Fitness>.
25. See Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* (Washington, DC: July 2017).
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. As *MCO 1500.61* notes, "The development of Marines and Sailors is a deliberate process, driven by commanders and leaders, and includes all Marines and sailors. Regular teaching, coaching, counseling, and mentoring between Marine leaders and subordinates is vital."
28. Ibid; and Staff, "USMC Human Performance Branch, Quantico VA," *Marines*, n.d., <https://www.fitness.marines.mil>. Marine Corps resiliency initiatives include mental fitness, physical fitness, and spiritual fitness under the Human Performance Branch, Quantico, VA. See also *Spiritual Fitness*.
29. "USMC Human Performance Branch, Quantico VA."
30. Ibid. As the official website for the Marine Corps Resiliency Program, the Human Performance Office is the repository of mental, social, and spiritual fitness training to include as well mental and physical fitness initiatives.
31. Ibid. One of the stated functions of the Human Performance Office is to "Explore, coordinate, implement, and oversee Marine Corps resiliency initiatives."
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. See Staff, "Fitness Resources," *Marine Corps University*, n.d., <https://www.usmcu.edu/mld-fitness>. The fitness resource page contains information and practices to aid Marines in promoting, sustaining, and restoring fitness."
36. *ALMAR 0027/20*.
37. Ibid. The focus on spiritual fitness is not simply an idealistic goal hearkening back to a bygone era. See generally *USMC's Concepts and Principles of Spiritual Fitness*. The available evidence supports the hypothesis that spiritual fitness creates better outcomes and individual behaviors during combat.
38. Ibid. See also Staff, "Dictionary of Navy Slang Compiled From Various Sources," *Goat Locker*, n.d., <http://goatlocker.org/resources/nav/navyslang.pdf>.
39. Department of the Navy, *NTTP I-05M and MCRP 6-12B, Religious Lay Leader*, (Washington, DC: May 2016).
40. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting* (Washington, DC: 1993).
41. Ibid; Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11B W/CH 1, Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders* (Washington, DC: October 1998); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning* (Washington, DC: 2020).



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