

Spiritual Fitness

The fourth dimension of Marine readiness

by RDML Gregory N. Todd, Chaplain of the Marine Corps

The vision the Commandant laid out in his *Commandant's Planning Guidance* is a sea change for everyone in the Corps. From the weapons systems we develop, to how we field those systems, to how we train Marines, everything is changing to confront the reality of a peer-level threat. Significantly, the Distributed Maritime Operations and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) construct is *absolutely dependent* on devolved decision making. Small unit leaders, cut off from the guidance of higher echelons, must be entrusted with making the right decisions with split-second timing. In other words, the prescience of Gen Krulak's strategic corporal is still current, only needing update in terms of how short the decision cycle is likely to become.¹

The United States seeks to become the partner of choice for allies and potential allies around the world; however, there are significant barriers to accomplishment. How is the United States to become the partner of choice

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in a world where other actors may offer similar advantages in technology, trade, and defense? How do we become the partner of choice when other actors offer these advantages *and* are geographically

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closer than the United States? Part of the answer lies in the individuals we send forward to be that partner on the ground. Only when we send forward spiritually fit individuals of strong char-



Chaplains serving and ministering alongside Marines help Marines maintain and increase their spiritual strength. Lt Vincent Capodanno conducts a field prayer service for the men of A Company, 1st Bn 7th Marines in Vietnam, 1967. (Photo by Katie Lange courtesy of the Father Capodanno Guild.)

acter, committed to the values of our Nation, is the balance tipped in our favor.

In crafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson drew on the philosophy of English thinker, John Locke. Locke mused that individuals had a right to life, liberty, and property.² Ultimately though, Jefferson opted to modify the phrase to the familiar "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The change is telling; the founders did not equate happiness with acquiring property, nor did they intend happiness in an amorphous, feelings-based way. The founders envisioned happiness as described with the Greek concept *eudemonia*, the deep happiness that arises from living a life of character consistent with one's core beliefs.

A Marine with *eudemonia* makes the right decisions independently of guidance from higher and represents our values to the world. The question is: how do we get there? Americans arrive to the yellow footprints from all sorts of experiences. Some arrive as people of good character; some arrive having been exposed to examples of bad character; some arrive with significant traumas in their past that makes becoming a Marine a titanic challenge. We would like to instill character within each recruit shortly after they step on those yellow footprints, but character development is not like an inoculation—nor can it be learned in a PowerPoint brief or a GMT. Character and spiritual fitness cannot be *part* of life as a Marine; it must be the *total* life of a Marine. Any



Building spiritual strength and resilience in the face of adversity is where Chaplains and Religious Program Specialists are true “combat multipliers.” (Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Jason Poplin.)

formulaic plan simply to insert character into a Marine is bound to fail.

The good news is that the Americans who choose to become Marines are already in a prime window to develop spiritual strength and become people of character. Evidence-based research in developmental psychology indicates that young adults between the ages of 15 and 25 have the best possible opportu-

to physical fitness.⁴ Marine Corps leaders at every level are to prioritize it, yet the greatest opportunity to facilitate spiritual fitness is via the mid-grade professional. It is the staff sergeants or the majors, those leaders both vested in the long-term success of the Corps and with the experience and maturity to both foster the work of spiritual fitness and drive it day after day. Giving

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nity to develop deep character and a life of meaning.³ Further, this development can be positively affected when young people are given the room to develop their own answers to the larger questions of life. In other words, we cannot tell young Marines what to think, but it is within our power to tell them *what to think about*. When Marines grapple with hard questions, they develop spiritual strength and resilience for what life throws at them.

The Commandant has elevated the importance of spiritual fitness as equal

these leaders the reins and freedom to lead in spiritual fitness will be key to its success.

Chaplains and religious program specialists are there to provide the moral, ethical, and spiritual “gym” where Marines become spiritually stronger. Stretching the analogy a little bit, they function as a kind of “trainer,” helping Marines grapple effectively with character development. At this moment, chaplains within TECOM are working to develop ways to help Marines develop their spiritual strength. For the

Chaplain Corps, this is an all-hands effort with immense importance to the Marine Corps and the nation.

In this construct, the benefit comes in the grappling, not in a certain, pre-defined outcome. Grappling with the hard questions, such as the meaning of honor, the types of courage, or the consequences of commitment, is the terminal objective. Spiritual fitness is like other types of fitness: there is no point when a Marine is done with spiritual fitness, any more than there is a point when a Marine is done with physical fitness. Spiritual fitness is an ethos, a way of life, which requires constant exercise. Commanders and leaders at every level have the same responsibility to see that it happens as they do for physical fitness. We cannot do the hard work of spiritual fitness for them, but we can provide the “gym,” the “trainers,” and the “exercises” that will get them there.

Marines who have been encouraged to think about the big questions, to grapple with their own beliefs and assumptions, are most likely to become Marines of character. Marines of character have the vision to recognize moral hazards, the wisdom to discern the honorable path, and the courage to take it. Spiritually fit Marines have the capacity to do these things in the blink of an eye and are trusted by their commanders to do so. That sort of Marine is the partner of choice in a chaotic and dangerous world.

Notes

1. Gen Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine*, (January 1999), available at <https://apps.dtic.mil>.

2. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952).

3. Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, (New York, NY: Picador, 2015).

4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 027/20, Resiliency and Spiritual Fitness*, (Washington, DC: December 2020).



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