

Spiritual Fitness Revisited

Where do we stand?

by CDR John J. Bombaro

It has been nearly three years since *ALMAR 033/16* sounded a clarion call that elevated the status and visibility of spiritual fitness. Anticipating the influx and integration of Generation Z with Generation X and Millennials within the Corps, *ALMAR 033/16* poised itself to engage an array of societal values from the first “screen” generations reared within the Internet Age and also to fortify the character of seasoned Marines and senior leaders. Spiritual fitness was positioned to aid in leaders aligning the personal values of individual Marines with those of the Corps and the Nation. The *ALMAR* did not issue a particular program of spiritual fitness but underscored the need to develop Marines inclusive of a spiritual framework, whereby spiritual fitness would serve as an engagement strategy in the development of Marines. How then has the Corps fared during these intervening years employing spiritual fitness as an engagement strategy? Or, put differently, what is the state of the Corps today with respect to the spiritual fitness initiative?

Essential to Training

From 2016, spiritual fitness, along with physical fitness, has been emphasized as “essential to the well-being of each individual Marine” and playing “a key role in resiliency,” that is, in the Marine’s ability to “grow, develop, recover, heal, and adapt.”¹ In the face of adversity and coming from a culture increasingly associated with moral relativism, consumerism, and entitlement, the 37th Commandant charged Marines to “steel your spirit so that you can better deal with adversity.”² Softness was to be transformed into toughness.

“Spiritual fitness,” defined as “the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles and values needed to persevere and prevail,

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advanced three main elements to assist Marines in achieving an optimal level of spiritual well-being.” *Personal faith* was the first of these elements, characterized as “a recognition of, belief in, trust in, or relationship with someone or something greater than one’s self.” It spanned both religious and non-religious notions of faith. *Foundational values*, the second element, are those values “Marines choose to live by that guide their choices, actions and the character they display on and off duty.” Thirdly, *moral living* called for Marines to be “equipped with a mechanism for reflecting on the past and recognizing behavior and decisions as moral or immoral.”³ All three elements are understood to be necessary for instilling grit and virtue in the modern American warfighter.

By July 2017, spiritual fitness had been integrated into *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* (MLD). MLD is a comprehensive approach to leadership development that seeks to foster the development of all aspects of Marines’ personal and professional lives so that warriors may be, uniquely, Marines and so fulfill their vocational warfighting purpose. There are six Functional Areas of Marine Leadership Development: Fidelity, Fighter, Fitness, Family, Finances, and Future. Spiritual fitness is housed within the functional area of Fitness. In this way, *MCO 1500.61* pivoted leadership development in a fresh, although not entirely new, direction by advancing spiritual fitness as an essential training

dynamic related to the total fitness of the Marine.

With the purpose of the Marine Corps in the fore of his thought (i.e. “make Marines, win battles and ultimately return quality citizens to society”), Gen Neller stated in *MCO 1500.61* that the Marine Corps warfighting philosophy required “leaders of high moral character and professional competence who demonstrate sound and timely judgment in all situations.”⁴ The scope of the Commandant’s order addresses all personnel and envelopes every moral judgment related to the domestic and social life of the Marine. Honor, courage, and commitment are to be a lifestyle, a worldview, and the Marine mindset.

Significantly, *MCO 1500.61* correlated the *identity* of a Marine (*who* is a Marine) with the *vocation* of being a Marine (*what* a Marine does) to the *purpose* of being a Marine (*why* or *for whom* a Marine does it). In other words, identity, vocation, and purpose were brought together and pinned to character. Spiritual fitness would address character since character rested on a foundation of values—values manifested through moral judgments informed by personal faith. In this way, the approach to Marine training became holistic and was to be embedded within every domain of the Marine Corps. MLD was the template for achieving this objective, yet without programmatically stipulating exactly how it was to look in every command. Within the categories of MLD, the spiritual fitness enterprise emphasized intentionality, flexibility, and opportunity.

Through MLD all Marines were to encounter and integrate spiritual fitness elements in training and mentoring, to the end that Marines would individually cultivate their faith, values, and moral living in order to fortify adherence to



The chaplain's "ministry through presence," especially in challenging situations, is a fundamental to spiritual fitness. (Photo by Cpl Anna Albrecht.)

the institution's core values and optimize their warfighting readiness. MLD was not just about instruction to commands but prompting initiative within commands. The Marine's lifestyle was to manifest consistency on and off duty because Marines have a moral purpose, a moral vocation, and a moral identity. To be moral is to be a Marine and to be a Marine is to be moral. All Marine Corps training was to emanate this ethical standard to which it had been summoned while every individual Marine was to embody that ethical standard on duty and off.

Necessary for Life and Victory

While MCO 1500.61 issued a summons for a fresh approach to holistic training and moral living, the 37th Commandant's strategy unmistakably mirrors the 13th Commandant's (John Archer Lejeune) century-old tenets to cultivate transformation.⁵ Gen Neller, in this sense, proposed nothing new but rather took the Corps back to the fundamental roots of its success—*morale*. Lejeune put it this way:

Esprit de corps and morale are kindred subjects; in fact, some writers consider them as synonymous. This, however, is not the case, as esprit de corps is only one of the factors which go to constitute morale. Morale is three-fold—

physical, mental or professional, and spiritual.⁶

Lejeune's tenets, or pillars, consist of self-awareness, ethical voice, spiritual resiliency, and inspiration. They constitute the main elements of what is called today "spiritual fitness." For John Lejeune, they comprise the warrior's spirit and are necessary for success and victory. There can be no Marine Corps without morale. Maurice Buford summarizes Lejeune's understanding of spirituality as "the irreplaceable higher force that ignites afire the being of a warrior to walk out self-sacrificing love, other-centeredness, to crush fear and to constantly purify one's soul from unworthy motives as they execute their purpose."⁷ Simply put, Lejeune promoted a dynamic concept of morale far more expansive than today's connotation of "the capacity of a group of people to pull together persistently and consistently in pursuit of a common purpose." Rather, Lejeune understood morale as, above all, the moral principles, teaching, and conduct of a person that fortified their mental and emotional ability to achieve a stated vocation or goal. Whether talking about the individual Marine or a group of Marines, Lejeune saw self-discipline as basic to morale and morale as necessary for success and victory. It was morale, he

believed, that provided each Marine and the Marine Corps itself with its edge.

Gen Neller restated Lejeune's principles in today's values-depleted cultural context by grounding morale—that is, the art of values-building, self-discipline—in the identity and purpose of a Marine, saying, "The Marine Corps is built on discipline and it is a rock. It is the foundation of the Corps." Again, to be a Marine is to be moral and disciplined, disciplined regarding moral decisions and response to duty. Put differently, Marines possess morale, and they must do so to fulfill their warfighting vocation. The result of inculcating and practicing morale is a virtuous, gritty warfighter, who returns to civilian life an exemplar of morality and patriotism. Thus, from both Lejeune and Neller come the vocabulary and concepts for spiritual fitness amidst efforts to rehabilitate institutional morale and personal self-discipline.

Common Language

George Lindbeck has noted that a community particularizes itself through its distinctive vocabulary. What makes the Marine Corps distinct from, say, the Navy begins with vocabulary. Consequently, the dissemination of a common language for spiritual fitness within the Marine Corps has been essential for universalizing the desired objectives of its engagement strategy. Terms immediately associated with spiritual fitness—such as personal faith, foundational values, and moral living (the main points of spiritual fitness)—are becoming common parlance alongside resilience, core values, and character, according to findings from the Chaplain of the Marine Corps. The employment of a shared lexicon throughout the Corps suggests both ownership of nomenclature and the establishment of the overarching spiritual domain. Thus, the term "spirit" can be said to be at home within the Marine Corps, finding considerable usage and tradition as an idiom ranging from esprit de corps to mind, body, and spirit. Relatedly, spirit plays favorably with the current high percentage of Marines who maintain proclivities toward religious affiliation. The aforementioned terms possess adequate specificity of meaning

and requisite flexibility for use in non-religious and religious contexts.

It has been further observed that “warrior toughness,” “warrior mindset,” and even, simply, “mindset” are now ubiquitous as spiritual fitness referents within Marine Corps communities. However, “grit,” a newcomer, is not well established but finds rising usage at the Marine Corps Recruit Depots and The Basic School, Quantico, training communities. Its usage is anticipated to become more prevalent as scholarly research substantiates the concept and popular media outlets standardize the term.

One indicator of the state of the spiritual fitness engagement strategy pertains to the consistency of term definitions. How well terms retain specified definitions through time and across a spectrum of geographical locations and communities indicates penetration and prevalence. Terminology uniformity goes hand in hand with universalizing a spiritual fitness vocabulary, but also standardizing it within the Corps, as members move from platform to platform. Initial findings from the Chaplain of the Marine Corps are promising in this regard. For example, the term “tough” and its derivatives are widely employed beyond narrow physical associations to include mental states and dispositional references. These latter references commonly stand at the forefront of both use and understanding among all Marines. Toughness aligns with the state of being strong enough to withstand adverse conditions, hardships, rough handling, and to cope with the same through an uncompromising approach. Beginning at MCRDs, Recruit Training Command Great Lakes, U.S. Naval Academy, and The Basic School, toughness has taken on a distinctive moral quality as opposed to a physical quality. The same can be said for the terms “mindset,” “values,” “discipline,” and “fidelity.”

Evidencing less consistency is the term “morale,” which does not enjoy the liberality of use and explicit ethical association outside of command localities. The richness and serviceability of the term warrant greater usage beyond command climate surveys and the mood

of the troops’ connotations, which give it an antiquated characteristic and limited range. Morale pertains to more than mere welfare, garnering ideas of *esprit d’corps*, fighting spirit, and troop welfare or mood. The historic importance of moral” should be recovered and can be so, especially when coupled with notions of discipline and morality promoted within MLD.

While recruits at boot camp may not be found routinely speaking in spiritual fitness terminology, notwithstanding an April 2019 survey of MCRD WRR 2Bn Phase 4 Marines confirmed that one hundred percent of recruits found the three main elements of spiritual fitness—personal faith, foundational values, and moral living—emphasized and extolled as necessary for developing resilience, personal success, and warfighting advantage. Significantly, the MCRDs are equipping new Marines with spiritual fitness concepts and familiarizing them enough with vocabulary that all Phase 4 Marines heading to their specialty schools knew about the importance of spiritual self-care heading into the fleet.

Sample Communities

The present state of spiritual fitness indicates a certain, but by no means comprehensive, maturation. When the engagement strategy was first announced in 2016, it did so with disclaimers that disassociated it from straightforward religious programming, especially since the Chaplain Corps played, and continues to play, a prominent role in the promotion of spiritual fitness. Spiritual fitness is to be practiced by all, with all leaders having stock in its advancement. As the Corps increasingly recognizes and appreciates spiritual fitness as both a fixture of its history and necessary for its success, spiritual fitness strategies are no longer subject to a battery of disobliging qualifications (spiritual fitness is *not* a philosophy, is *not* religion per se, is *not* metaphysics, is *not* a program, etc.). Instead, enclaves throughout the Marine Corps may be found speaking more by way of affirmation than negation about spiritual fitness initiatives. The place of religion and religious content seems, on the whole, to be well-understood and need not be artificially nor unnece-

sarily over-explained. Here, again, is a healthy indicator regarding the current state of spiritual fitness within the Marine Corps, namely its assertive features directing conversations and strategies rather than disclaimers, important as they may be.

An example of comparative maturation may be found within the MCRDs. The influential Core Values Guided Discussions, principally led by senior drill instructors, employ tie-in narratives to affect a convergence of Marine Corps core values with personal faith and member values. Senior drill instructions show considerable savvy and discretion when teaching on matters ranging from sexual conduct and pornographic consumption to financial responsibility and social media in order to align values toward moral living. The three main elements of spiritual fitness feature prominently in Core Values Guided Discussions. Senior drill instructors and “Green Belts,” as well as company commanders and chaplains, have shown remarkable initiative in making spiritual fitness their own through laudable, idiosyncratic applications and do so without reticence. The frank, personalized approach from drill instructors allows them to tell their values-laden stories while serving as examples of physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness and passing on the expectation of the same to the Marine Corps’ newest would-be leaders and mentors. The adaptations present at the MCRDs evidence the malleable nature of spiritual fitness and therefore its complexion as an engagement strategy, agreeable to *ALMAR 033/16* and *MCO 1500.61*.

Relatedly, the Drill Instructor Schools’ curriculum is replete with spiritual fitness vocabulary, concepts, and initiatives promoting drill instructor ownership of values-based training, indoctrinating core values, mentoring, and belief in something greater than self to foster toughness, resiliency, discipline, and virtue. Recruits, in turn, are the direct beneficiaries of this values-rich curriculum.

The value of instilling the Marine Corps’ core values in terms of yielding a higher quality Marine from boot camp has recently initiated the implementation of similar character-building ele-

ments into the Delayed Entry Program, beginning the transformation process before even arriving at boot camp. Physical fitness expectations and training in the pooling phase have been shown to increase the confidence and preparedness of incoming recruits. The same thinking is now being applied to spiritual fitness, namely to communicate and train to the moral standards of the Marine Corps even before seeing the yellow footprints. Thus, spiritual fitness engagement strategies in this case reach across no less than four domains (The Basic School, Drill Instructor School, MCRD, and Delayed Entry Program) in a concerted effort to *steel the spirit* of developing Marines.

Reserve assets are a community that presents challenges associated with time and opportunity limitations. Organized leadership development enterprises struggle to be sustained for any duration. Consequently, as with active-duty components, opportunities for mentoring, school-circle instruction, hip-pocket classes, and tie-in morality shop talks should be continually implemented by leaders who often do so more informally. Within the reserves particularly, intentional mentoring and close relations between peers and near-peers are indispensably important since opportunities for developed spiritual fitness initiatives are few. There can be no morale without it. Non-commissioned officers are spiritual fitness' greatest asset among the reserves since they are the most connected both up and down the chain of command.

Where communities link together to sustain the transformation or facilitate morale saturation, spiritual fitness offers the probability of lasting impact—enhancing the character dimension of Marine Corps culture.

Religious Marines

Compared with its Navy counterparts, the Marine Corps owns a greater per capita concentration of religious adherents. For recruits and Marines whose religion is valued, provision for particular religious observation has ascended in priority as spiritual fitness envelops the personal faith element of Marine morale. Command Religious Programs, facilitated by the Chaplain and religious

program specialists (Religious Ministry Team), have increased the profile, presence, accessibility, and serviceability of the Religious Ministry Team in both active duty and reserve components. As the spiritual fitness initiative engages the Chaplain Corps with increased responsibilities and opportunities for service (e.g. Force Preservation Councils and the implementation of chaplain initiatives), Marines encounter a broader and more purposeful integration of their personal faith with the core values of the institution.

The 2016 spiritual fitness initiative has so impacted the Chaplain Corps that the Department of the Navy revised "Strategic Plan for Religious Ministry" (FY19) to integrate the three main ele-

Fitness, Spiritual Resiliency, and Spiritual Care flipbooks sat idly on shelves or chaplains awaited invitations to address the spiritual welfare, moral judgments, and the warrior toughness of Marines and sailors (in short, morale), now Command Religious Programs and Marine Leadership Development infuse spiritual fitness opportunities and components into unit training plans, professional military education, and other training regimens. Religious Ministry Teams are taking beneficial materials like the *Spiritual Fitness* flipbook and *Marine Mindset Values Builder* to where Marines are living, training, and working. This development is not only welcome but necessary, albeit it cannot be said to be universal. There is room for expan-

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ments of spiritual fitness into each of its four stated goals to operationalize to support ministry in combat; sharpen core capabilities; develop chaplain corps leaders with intentionality; and champion the spiritual readiness of sailors and Marines. Such integration requires not only external commitment to champion the spiritual readiness and toughness of sailors and Marines but internal Chaplain Corps character development and professionalization so that they may advise and lead with integrity and know-how.

Active Not Passive Engagement

Scores of localized endeavors evidence the fact that spiritual fitness is shifting from a state of *passivity* on the part of commands to *activity*. No longer is spiritual fitness something that the individual Marine may be assumed to be privately doing but rather the Marine's spiritual fitness is something about which he can expect to be routinely challenged by peers and near-peers, as well as leaders. Where once copies of *Spiritual*

sion and more intentional saturation.

Tools such as the *Spiritual Fitness* tie-in flipbook, developed in 2018, FIRE Chats initiated within the 2nd Tank Battalion, *Marine Mindset Values-Builder* modules (Internet-based) initiated within 2MEF, iRelate, and other programs, seminars, and engagement strategies proactively bring leaders, near-peer mentors, and religious ministry teams into workspaces without unduly taxing training cycles or hampering operations. Yet much more can be done to instruct and aid commanders in the implementation of *ALMAR 033/16*.

Spiritual Fitness Drop-Off

In 2019, spiritual fitness does not enjoy uniform application or implementation through Marine Leadership Development endeavors. Not all commands are intentional about spiritual fitness. Not all leaders are intentional. There are gaps.

The most oft-reported drop-off of spiritual fitness intentionality follows boot camp. While the MCRDs should

be commended for their conscious employment of spiritual fitness engagement strategies and integrating the same through Drill Instructor School and delayed entry programming, the Marine Corps itself remains challenged by the drop-off in sustaining the transformation following MCRD training. And yet, all newly minted Marines departing from MCRD report, according to an April 2019 Chaplain of the Marine Corps survey, a resolve to sustain their transformation by practicing spiritual fitness. However, it is at the next stages in a young Marine's career that spiritual fitness resources frequently prove to be thin nest and opportunities for undesirable behaviors tend to be thickest or, simply, relapsing into patterns of behavior and thought held by the Marine prior to boot camp—not the least of which being personal device usage, pornography, alcohol consumption, idleness, inadvisable relationships, sexual indiscretion, and general lack of self-discipline. Marines have been produced so successfully through boot camp that they possess and confess resolve to sustain their transformation and further their spiritual fitness. The Marine Corps needs to rise to this challenge.

MOS schools, SOI, and MCT facilitate excellent occupational and combat skills training, producing the world's best fighting force. Important at this juncture in a Marine's tour of service is near-peer values-building purposed to reinforce a culture of morale—ethical living, grit, and fidelity—such that resonates with the three main elements of spiritual fitness. Without engendering a culture that safeguards morale at the level of junior Marines, the opportunity to sustain the transformation has not been thoroughly developed. Corporals can and should be leaders of junior Marines teaching values-building materials to establish an accountability climate in which they both convey the expectation and resource the ability to meet the expectation while at the same time are themselves accountable to their sphere of responsibility.

Episodic culture workshops are rightly prized by commands to stimulate change or enhance desired outcomes. For sustained and systemic change to take

place, however, patterns of habits and mindsets need to conform to institutional standards, be it moral or otherwise. This happens by formally reinforcing the culture from within the culture on a weekly basis so that it continues to take place informally on a daily basis. Junior Marines are capable of leading junior Marines in modules exploring personal faith, foundational values, and moral living, thereby fortifying a moral culture within an accountability loop. With useful tools, corporals and sergeants can accomplish this in various settings, including barracks environments and deployment or mobilization.

Marine Leadership Development intends for Marines to lead in some capacity. Notwithstanding, the Marine Corps recognizes that some Marines are not natural leaders, nor do they adapt well to leadership cultivation. The Corps does not operate with homogenous leadership potential throughout its ranks. It never did and it never will. Instead, there exists a portion of Marines who may be characterized as servant-leaders or given to "bold followership" by way of personal disposition (which is itself a kind of leadership that, curiously, does not respond well to leadership training *per se*). There are Marines who lead and there are Marines who follow. Diversifying the range of MLD to consciously include Marines with dispositions to be bold followers may yield yet unexplored opportunities to further transformation and heighten grit, resiliency, and fighting spirit. Bold followership, too, is an essential dynamic of Marine Corps morale.

Knowing one's purpose matters and it is directly related to spiritual fitness. It matters because it supplies meaning and a sense of belonging. Each Marine, be it the resolute leader or bold follower, should have the purpose of his or her vocation communicated to them. Marines are worthy of knowing *why* their specialization is purposeful. Each Marine should routinely be informed as to how their occupation is connected to the total mission, the greater good, the purpose of their unit, and even the purpose of the Marine Corps. Furthermore, in keeping with spiritual fitness concepts, Marines should understand that they have a vocation, a calling from

the nation that is purposeful. Jobs have menial associations. They solicit shallow commitment and are easily quit. Vocations, however, are callings infused with meaning and significance, giving each and every Marine a purpose in the Corps, a purpose by our Nation, and a purpose in life. Leaders work along the lines of spiritual fitness when purpose is communicated and connected to the Marine's vocation. Purpose, as John Lejeune noted, is a major factor in the recruitment and retention of Marines since it is bound to notions of patriotism. And patriotism, he said, is manifest through a Marine's "self-sacrificing love for each other, for their unit, for their division, and for their country."⁸ That is the heart of the spiritual fitness initiative.

ALMAR 033/16 set a lofty goal in late 2016 but one that Marine Corps history has shown is necessary for success and victory. There must be morale. And that is why spiritual fitness engagement strategies will continue to be an essential component of MLD and why additional endeavors are needed now and into the future.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 033/16* (Washington, DC: October 2016).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Message to the Force: 2017 "Seize the Initiative"* (Washington, DC: 2017).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: 2018).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1500.61, 1, Marine Leader Development* (Washington, DC: July 2017).
5. Maurice A. Buford, *The Servant Way: Leadership Principles from John A. Lejeune* (BookBaby).
6. John A. Lejeune, "A Legacy of Esprit and Leadership," *Marine Corps Gazette* 97, no. 2 (2013).
7. *The Servant Way*.
8. John A. Lejeune, *The Reminiscences of A Marine* (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Company, 1930).

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