

Spiritual Fitness and Leadership

Our values are the foundation for the character that builds esprit de corps

by Maj Joshua Montero

Gen Robert B. Neller, our 37th Commandant, asked Marines to reflect on spiritual fitness and the actions necessary to achieve and maintain an optimal level of strength and resilience in *ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, October 2016). Overall fitness comprises physical, mental, social, and spiritual fitness, but the meaning of the last is somewhat elusive. The Commandant is not specific about ideology, faith, religion, or *esprit de corps*—perhaps that is intentional. Upon reflection, I derive that spiritual fitness is an aspect of *esprit de corps* that helps build morale, and that core values are the foundation for our high moral character and *esprit de corps*. Furthermore, religious faith complements and strengthens Marine Corps core values, and I offer examples from my own faith as a Christian. Most importantly, leaders must approach spiritual fitness as they would any other aspect of a Marine's training.

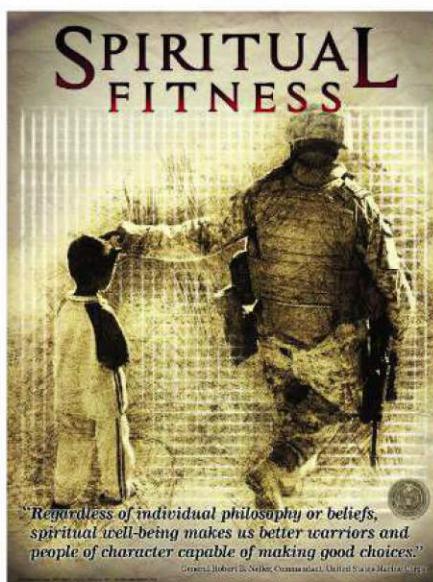
In his 1921 address to the Army General Staff College, Gen John A. Lejeune stated that morale was three-fold: physical, mental or professional, and spiritual. The former two are simple to acquire through both physical training and military instruction, yet he stated that “the ... spirit is a more or less unknown field to all of us and ... very difficult for us to comprehend.” This is echoed in *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, which states, “Moral and mental forces exert a greater influence [than the physical] on the nature and outcome of a war.”¹ Furthermore, Napoleon claimed that morale is to the material as three to one, and Marshal Ferdinand Foch increased

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the ratio to four to one.² Arguing further, Gen Lejeune asserted that,

The subject (morale) is worthy of [the commander's] careful attention, and no officer should rest satisfied until he feels that he possesses that greatest of all assets - the ability to play upon the emotions of his men in such a manner as to produce that most wonderful of all harmonies - the music of the human heart attuned to great deeds and great achievements.³

This *esprit de corps* certainly warrants reflection to attain a high level of resiliency.



*Spiritual fitness makes us better Marines.
(Poster created by Sharon McPeak.)*

Core values provide the foundation for high moral character and *esprit de corps*. The core values of the Marine Corps are honor, courage, and commitment. Honor is the bedrock of our character that guides ethical behavior and encompasses respect, integrity, trust, responsibility, and accountability. Courage is the physical and moral strength to overcome fear and adversity necessary for high personal conduct and to make difficult decisions. Commitment is the dedication that leads to professionalism, mastery of arms, and discipline; it encompasses tenacity and fortitude that bonds concern for others and mission accomplishment. Gen Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant, stated that “our challenge is to ... represent the highest moral character in and out of uniform.”⁴ He emphasized, in *ALMAR 248/96, Character*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1996), that character develops every day, whether deployed or in garrison; it provides a shield against fear and despair, and it acts as a “moral compass” in the midst of adversity. Honor, courage, and commitment are core values that guide character and build *esprit de corps*, and I discovered that religious faith can add to these values and strengthen spiritual fitness and resiliency. Religious faith can provide a deeper foundation to address heavy alcohol use, suicide, sexual promiscuity, profanity, and many other topics that degrade the spiritual fitness and resiliency of the Marine Corps.



Spirituality has a place in each individual's life. (Photo by LCpl Scott Whiting.)

Religious faith is not for everyone, and there is certainly a variety to choose from. Still, it can provide an answer to those struggling to understand the meaning of their life and the inevitable death that is to come, something which our profession is well acquainted with. It can provide direction in the chaotic environment of combat or when making decisions on liberty. It can be a source of strength as Marines transition away from the military and back to civilian life. I can only attempt to convey the personal experiences with my own religious faith as a Christian, and I hope that those of other faiths would write their perspective to strengthen resiliency and improve spiritual fitness within the Marine Corps.

My life verse from the Bible is Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."⁵ Throughout three deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, I found myself both afraid and discouraged. Yet, as a leader, I found comfort and reassurance in this verse. It certainly complements the Marine Corps value of "courage." Ephesians 4:1–3 reinforces the core value of "honor" and reminds me to walk worthy of the calling of a Marine. II Timothy 4:7 reinforces the core value of "commitment" and reminds me to keep faith. Other verses

go beyond the core values of the Marine Corps and guide my character development. James 3:1–10 guides the manner in which I speak to and about others. Ephesians 5:18 guides my decisions regarding alcohol. Philippians 1:21 provides me an outlook on death. Psalm 119:28 and 147:3 comforted me when I lost Marines and my father. Several verses guide a prayer life that restores the soul and offers hope when all seems hopeless. These verses simply illustrate the significant contribution of religious faith to building character, spiritual fitness, and resiliency in addition to the core values of the Marine Corps. Physical, mental, and spiritual strength is necessary for resiliency, and each requires leadership for full development.

Leaders must take a personal stake in the training and instruction of their Marines as well as the development of *esprit de corps* within the unit. Just as leaders take care of their Marines' physical and mental wellbeing with proper exercise, billeting, chow, equipment, discipline, and MOS instruction, so too should they care for their spiritual fitness. In 2002, Then-MajGen James N. Mattis, CG, 1st MarDiv, remarked in a meeting with his battalion commanders that it would be wise to encourage their Marines to prepare themselves spiritually. In *A Table in the Presence*, Chaplin Carey Cash paraphrases him, saying, "Ensure that each of your men

has made peace with his God and is ready, if called upon, to face the dangers of battle, and his own mortality."⁶ Cash further recounts the leadership of Capt Blair Sokol and 1stSgt James Green of Alpha Company, 1st Bn, 5th Marines. He credits them with making the spiritual lives of their Marines that of highest priority. Chaplin Cash writes of a spiritual awakening in Alpha Company and resiliency in the midst of the tragic loss of their platoon commander, 2ndLt Shane Childers—the first casualty in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Leaders must approach spiritual fitness as they would any other aspect of their Marines' training.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps called on all Marines to reflect on spiritual fitness and actions to achieve and maintain an optimal level of strength and resilience. Gen Lejeune alluded to the spiritual as *esprit de corps*, which combines with the physical and mental to build morale. Marine Corps core values of honor, courage, and commitment provide the foundation for character that builds *esprit de corps*, and religious faith adds value to character development and strengthens spiritual fitness and resiliency. Most importantly, just as leaders have a responsibility to physically train and instruct their Marines, they must tend to the spiritual fitness of their Marines. Cultivated, they combine to form resiliency that can overcome insurmountable odds.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11B, Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders*, (Washington, DC: October 1998).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).
6. Carey Cash, *A Table in the Presence*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004).

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