

# Strategy Research Project

## The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos: Practicality for Today's Operating Environment

by

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Class of 2013

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: A

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**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**

*Form Approved*  
OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> xx-03-2013		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b>	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos: Practicality for Today's Operating Environment				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Lieutenant Colonel William R. Speigle II United States Marine Corps				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Dr. Janeen Klinger Department of National Security and Strategy				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> Word Count: 7,103					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The current operating environment varies from the large scale unlimited wars of the past (WW II). This new operating environment may be inconsistent with a warrior ethos if that ethos does not place value on all human life, adhere to core values and recognize the importance of leaders, at all levels. Adherence to the warrior ethos is critical because in the current environment, small unit tactical actions have strategic level impacts. The current Marine Corps' warrior ethos is a product of its warrior culture and distinctive heritage. Successful implementation of the warrior ethos requires a Marine to possess the distinctive character traits of sacrifice and discipline forged through the unique and transformational experience of Marine Corps entry-level training. Violations of the Marine Corps warrior ethos have occurred in recent conflicts. Exploration of these violations is vital to ensure an institutional problem does not exist. Leadership, command climate and the use of Enlisted Professional Military Education will correct these problems ensuring the Marine Corps' warrior ethos continues to flourish into the future.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Ethics, Leadership, Training					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  36	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b> UU	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UU			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b>



USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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## **Abstract**

Title: The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos: Practicality for Today's Operating Environment

Report Date: March 2013

Page Count: 36

Word Count: 7,103

Key Terms: Ethics, Leadership, Training

Classification: Unclassified

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## **The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos: Practicality for Today's Operating Environment**

The United States Marine Corps has a long rich history with the reputation of being noble warriors. The tradition was solidified throughout World War II during the United States Pacific theater campaign leading to the eventual unconditional surrender of the Japanese empire. The flag rising on Mount Surabachi during the battle of Iwo Jima, perhaps the most famous picture from Marine Corps history in World War II epitomizes the Marine Corps celebrated status among the world's armed forces.

The United States is currently engaged in a new type of conflict. The current operating environment shows little resemblance to the islands in the South Pacific fighting a conventional Japanese army. World War II was the last unlimited war the where the United States conducted total war. In the pacific theater, World War II was a prolonged state on state warfare with the clear understanding of the national objective. Roosevelt made this clear when he used the phrase of "unconditional surrender" and his desire to have complete defeat of the enemy that placed an additional heavy burden on the military commitment.<sup>1</sup> This burden placed additional pressure upon the home front, as America had to conduct a complete mobilization of the country's assets for total war and to achieve victory. The savage fighting between the Japanese soldiers and U. S. Marines resulted in heavy casualties. The current operating environment does not lend itself to the conduct of unlimited war. The following excerpt from *Flags of our Fathers* describes the savagery of unlimited war. "The battle of Iwo Jima quickly turned into a primitive contest of gladiators: the Japanese gladiators fighting from the protection of their tunnels and the exposed Americans using liquid gasoline to burn their opponents out of their hiding place."<sup>2</sup> The warrior ethos served the Marines well in this campaign. The ethos allowed individual Marines to fight in a brutal manner, preserve

their fellow warrior's life, and accomplish the mission. The operating environment dictated the use of the warrior ethos to ensure mission accomplishment. In unlimited war, the interpretation of ethics changes to fit the operational situation. This is not to say that the Marines did not adhere to an ethical standard, on the contrary, many Marines were able to perform their mission and maintain value on all human life. The late Robert Humphrey, a platoon commander on Iwo Jima, faced the following ethical dilemma.

There was unavoidable killing every day. I saw a Japanese boy trying to surrender and understood that this was perhaps the only time that I did not have to kill, I took the opportunity. I believe that action saved my humanity and while many veterans suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) I do not, and I attributes it to saving that boys life.<sup>3</sup>

The restraint demonstrated by Robert Humphrey as a platoon saved more than just his humanity that day. Robert's act demonstrated to his men the value of human life and how a Marine can show humanity and still be a warrior. The leadership displayed by Robert Humphrey is especially appropriate for today's operating environment. His actions illustrate to a young leader the importance of leadership in combat with respect to ethics and adherence to the warrior ethos. Unlimited war called for the arming of the masses possessing minimal skill in the application and ethical use of force. The current fight calls for an individual who possess the technical skills of combat the ethics to employ lethal firepower and a willingness to serve in uniform to allow others the freedom not to serve.<sup>4</sup>

### The Current Operating Environment

The current operating environment presents U.S. forces with demanding challenges. A significant trend is the blurring distinct forms of warfare-conventional war, irregular challenges, terrorism, and criminality- into what can be described as hybrid

challenges.<sup>5</sup> Frank Hoffman writes that conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be characterized as hybrid wars that do not allow the United States the luxury of building single mission forces to fight only unlimited wars. The current Marine must possess the skill and training to perform the entire range of military operations. These ambiguous missions place an increased demand on the individual Marine's character, determination, and decision making. The complicated assignments require a Marine that can maintain their moral fiber in the current complex environment. Hoffman notes that the Marine Corps will be required to "balance between a potent conventional combat capability and their Small War's toolkit."<sup>6</sup>

Future and current enemies of the United States may involve states, proxy forces, non-state actors or most likely, a combination of all types armed with various weapons. These weapons may range from Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to an Improved Explosive Devices (IED) to the lone shooter with an AK-47 assault rifle. The purpose of the enemy's operations will be to impose excessive political, human, and material costs in order to undermine the United States' resolve and commitment. Military operations face extraordinary challenges that include physical, human, and cultural terrain to navigate. The adversary may not adhere to the same ethical conduct expected from U.S. forces causing ethical dilemmas for leaders. Small unit actions or inactions may have strategic consequences and there will not be a technological silver bullet or doctrinal formula to ensure military success.<sup>7</sup>

Future conflict of irregular warfare will require the Marine Corps to conduct Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations similar to those in Iraq and Afghanistan. In accordance with Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5, COIN is "war

amongst the people”.<sup>8</sup> In COIN operations, insurgents seek to hide among the local populace placing individual Marines in the precarious position to positively identify targets and protect non-combatants. These delicate and dangerous actions force the Marine to assume personal risk to protect non-combatants. Risk taking is a common attribute in current operations and is an essential part of the Warrior Ethos, the protection of non-combatants is difficult placing tough demands on Marines and their leaders.<sup>9</sup>

The acceptance of risk for the protection of non-combatants has traditionally been challenging for Marines. Protection of non-combatants may be contrary to self-preservation or preservation of fellow warriors, and it places a higher value on the non-combatant life. This risk acceptance is one of the largest changes for the warrior ethos from World War II (unlimited war) through our current operating environment (limited war). Risk acceptance is vital because it facilitates trust between the local populace and Marines leading to an environment that is beneficial to COIN operations.

### The Strategic Corporal

In 1999, then Commandant of the Marine Corps General Charles Krulak introduced the concept of the Strategic Corporal. This concept illustrates the importance for Marines to comprehend the linkage between tactical actions by small units and strategic level implications. General Krulak argues that success or failure will rest, increasingly, with the rifleman and their ability to make the right decision at the right time at the point of contact.<sup>10</sup> Technological advances in weapons and communication assets allow Marines to operate dispersed across the battlefield away from the “flagpole.” These missions require them to make well-reasoned and independent decisions under extreme stress and complexity where they will potentially

influence not only the immediate tactical situation but the operational and strategic level as well.<sup>11</sup>

How should the Marine Corps prepare Marines for this complex environment and the conduct of distributed operations? General Krulak offers three steps to implement this operational concept. The first step is the emphasis on character. Character must remain the bedrock for everything.<sup>12</sup> Everything else will stem from this concept because many of the most demanding situations a Marine will encounter in the future will be moral decisions on how to protect non-combatants, employ lethal weapon systems and to reduce or eliminate collateral damage.

The second step is an institutional commitment to lifelong professional development through schools, unit training, and Enlisted Professional Military Education (EPME). The common thread uniting all these activities is emphasis on encouraging integrity, courage, initiative, decisiveness, mental agility, and personal accountability.<sup>13</sup>

The final step is the ethical leadership from the Officers through the Non-Commissioned Officers that will affect every Marine. The institutionalization of the Strategic Corporal concept has not occurred. The critical first step captures the essence of the warrior ethos while the second and third steps ensure the warrior ethos remains relevant throughout a Marine's career.

#### What is the Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos?

The Marine Corps does not have the term "warrior ethos" defined in any document, yet Marines use the term warrior in multiple documents and individual Marines use the term on a daily basis referring to one another. In Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025, the 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps communicates his vision for the future stating that every Marine is a rifleman and regardless of military

occupational specialty is first and foremost a disciplined warrior.<sup>14</sup> However, there is no clear definition of the term warrior. The 35<sup>th</sup> Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Amos discusses the term ethos in his planning guidance, “Our ethos has been shaped by ordinary men and women...the essence of what we have been, who we are and we will be.”<sup>15</sup>

The term warrior is defined by Merriam-Webster as a man (or woman) engaged or experienced in warfare; *broadly*: a person engaged in some struggle or conflict.<sup>16</sup> This same reference defines ethos in the following manner: the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution.<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we will use the following as the definition for the Marine Corps’ “warrior ethos”:

The Warrior Ethos is preparing for warfare while maintaining a distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, and strict adherence to the Core Values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment. This sentiment underlies everything a Marine executes in peacetime and war embodying sacrifice and discipline. Moreover, it reminds Marines they serve the nation and fellow citizens in any capacity necessary to promote the nation’s vital interests.<sup>18</sup>

This definition defines the term giving Marines a common starting point. In order to show how the Marine Corps warrior ethos differs from conventional usage the paper will explore the elements of the Marine Corps warrior ethos with respect to core values, history, and service culture.

### United States Marine Corps Core Values

In 1992, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Carl E. Mundy established the core values of the Marine Corps. There are three basic values: Honor, Courage, and Commitment. These core values serve as the foundation for Marines character and ethical norms. Marines are held to the highest standards of personal

conduct and the nation expects this suitable conduct from all Marines.<sup>19</sup> General Mundy defined the core values in a statement to the Marine Corps in the following manner:

Honor: The bedrock of a Marine's character...exemplify the ultimate in ethical and moral behavior; respect and concern for others; fulfill obligations and hold others accountable for their actions.

Courage: The heart of the Marine's Core Values. Courage is mental, moral and physical strength to carry them through challenges and do what is right. It is the inner strength that enables a Marine to do what is right.

Commitment: The spirit and determination and dedication that leads to professionalism and mastery of the art of war. Commitment is the value that establishes the Marine as the warrior and citizen others strive to emulate.<sup>20</sup>

Although these core values have been around the Marine Corps since its inception, General Mundy was the first to actually record and define them. The core values do not just compliment the warrior ethos for the Marine Corps the core values form the bedrock of its institutional and individual character.<sup>21</sup> The core values define the standards that are acceptable for a Marine's actions and character in both war and peacetime. These core values are essential for the understanding of the Marine Corps' warrior ethos.

### The Role of Service Culture and History

The Marine Corps enjoys a distinctive service culture entangled with the rich history of the Marine Corps. In the journal *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Phillip S. Meilinger defines military culture in the following way, "Socially transmitted behavior patterns, beliefs, and institutions that shape a community or population and influence the way people fight, affecting not only goals and strategies but also methods, technologies, weapons, force structures, and even tactics."<sup>22</sup> According to Colonel Norman L. Cooling and Lieutenant Colonel Roger B. Turner, two predominant factors influence the Marine

Corps' unique and evolving culture. The first is the blending of traditional national, naval, and military cultures and the second is the productive, institutional obsession for remaining relevant.<sup>23</sup>

The Marine Corps' service culture shares the high value it has always placed on human life with its role in the nation's defense. The second factor is the Marine Corps concern that there will come a time when the Marine Corps may be viewed as a "nice to have" for the Department of Defense in these times of constrained resources. This concern for self preservation has forced the Marine Corps to remain relevant and identify roles that are exclusive from any other service.

A unique aspect of the Marine Corps culture is the manner in which they organize to conduct combat operations. This distinctive aspect of task organizing illustrates a clear example how the Marine Corps remains relevant and distinct from the U.S. Army. Furthermore, it is only possible to organize in this manner if every Marine embodies the warrior ethos. The Marine Corps task organizes into an organization known as a Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) these are integrated air-ground-logistics teams that enable the Marine Corps to provide a scalable force to the joint force commander at any level. The MAGTF is comprised of a headquarters element for command and control, an Aviation Combat Element (ACE) for aviation operations, a Ground Combat Element (GCE) for ground operations and a Logistics Combat Element (LCE) for logistical combat service support. There are not extra infantry or security Marines provided in the MAGTF for the protection of high value targets or logistical resupply. It is the individual unit and Marine's responsibility to provide security with their weapons platform for their mission.



A Combat Logistics Battalion (CLB) that is comprised of combat support trained Marines provide their own security. A Marine must possess the capability to fight as a rifleman and employ all organic weapons. In a MAGTF, the commander expects that every Marine in the organization can fight like infantry, allowing the commander to maximize combat power forward oriented on the adversary. The warrior ethos across all Military Occupational Specialty's (MOS) provides the MAGTF commander flexibility and feasibility on missions that are distinctive. Larger, naturally more bureaucratic organizations, like the U.S. Army cannot duplicate the Marine's unique institutional warrior ethos, born through history and mediums of warfare on land, sea, and air.<sup>24</sup>

Frank Hoffman attempts to explain the culture of the Marine Corps. Hoffman depicts the Marine Corps ethos in the following manner, "Marines worship at the altar of Combat Readiness-physically mentally and morally, and a Marine is a Marine for life it's a form of worship of service and a genuine recognition of the arduous process of becoming a Marine."<sup>25</sup> Hoffman illustrates two key components of Marine Corps culture that assist in the development of a warrior ethos, combat readiness and development of Marines. The Marine Corps warrior ethos results from this combination. Hoffman identifies that the most important item in the Marine Corps is the individual Marine and the process of becoming a Marine bestows on the Marine their identity for life. This new found identity creates a bond among Marines, creating a loyalty towards each other and the institution. Secondly, he emphasizes combat readiness ensuring every Marine remains focused on preparation for combat.

The other focal point exemplifying the Marine Corps' warrior ethos is the face of "Intra-service Distinction."<sup>26</sup> Every Marine is a rifleman first and then their sub-specialty.

The only device or insignia that is treasured and serves as an artifact in the organization is the Eagle, Globe and Anchor, everything else is subordinate to that.<sup>27</sup> The commitment to each other, the Corps, and readiness signifies that Marines are warriors first then everything else follows.

The Marine Corps views war as “a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills...characterized by friction, uncertainty, fluidity, disorder and danger.”<sup>28</sup> This is taken from Clausewitz’ theory and reinforces the Marine Corps belief that the nature of war has been and always will be about people, no matter what technological advantages are developed in the future. Marine doctrine reflects this mindset and views war as a social phenomenon recognizing that Marines must do the intimate killing necessary to attain national objectives.<sup>29</sup> A Marine that possesses a warrior ethos in order to win these conflicts and maintain their core values can only fight this intimate killing and social phenomenon known as war.

The challenge in the current operating environment is to ensure a Marine understands the difference between killing, in order to protect human life and killing because they have the capability to take human life. Taking the life of a human in accordance with the law of armed conflict is acceptable. Indeed, the current strategic environment makes it even more imperative to avoid collateral damage. The ability for a Marine to understand the difference between these acts is essential to maintaining honor. Realistic training, leadership, and strict adherence to a warrior ethos develops a Marine’s ability to conduct discriminate killing. As Marine Corps Commandant General Conway has stated, “The challenges of combat demand strong leadership at all levels-

the steadfast leadership of our NCOs...these small unit leaders reinforce our Core Values...While the battlefields may change, our values will not.”<sup>30</sup>

### Every Marine a Rifleman

An individual in the service will identify themselves as “in” the Army or Navy but a person in the Marine Corps states that they “are a” Marine. This unique aspect of the Marine Corps is a product from the indoctrination at recruit training and the exclusive focus on combat readiness. These factors inculcate a recruit with a warrior ethos from their first arrival at recruit training. In fact, the process actually goes back one-step further to initial assessment or recruitment of the individual. To be eligible for the Marine Corps an individual enters the “pool” of potential Marines, a “poolie” must meet basic physical, mental, and moral requirements established by the Marine Corps Military Personnel Procurement Manual.<sup>31</sup>

The marketing effort to recruit Marines contributes to the overall warrior ethos ensuring recruits volunteer for the right reason. The Marine Corps advertising campaign communicates a consistent message to the audience. The message emphasizes that an individual joins the Marine Corps to be part of an institution and for one reason, to be a Marine, an intangible benefit. There is no promise of college grants or job skills for later in life, only a promise of challenges at entry-level training and strict standards of character coupled with the most demanding discipline within the armed services.<sup>32</sup> An individual is promised an introduction to being a warrior and one must accept the warrior ethos if they want to be a Marine.

Marine Corps recruit training occurs at either Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) San Diego, CA or at MCRD Parris Island, SC, with only two locations the Marine Corps is able to maintain a comparable program of instruction that ensures

consistency of training and development of Marines. Following recruit training Marines attend initial Infantry training at the School Of Infantry (SOI). At SOI Marines with an Infantry occupation attend Infantry Training Battalion (ITB) for two months and then transfer to the operating forces. All other Marines, regardless of their future occupation, attend Marine Combat Training Battalion (MCT) for 30 days of basic infantry skills; following MCT, the new Marines attend their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) School.

Similar to the MCRDs there are only two Schools Of Infantry, SOI-West and SOI-East. The two locations ensure consistency of instruction for all Marines that attend the School Of Infantry. This consistency of instruction serves to reinforce the Marine Corps warrior culture, spirit, and ethos.

All Marines move along one of the two entry-level training paths. The Marine Corps leverages the distinct feature of the two entry level training paths to inculcate foundational concepts across the institution. In 2006, the final report from the Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) IV, Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07 contained findings that raised serious concerns and prompted immediate action across DOD.<sup>33</sup> General Conway, then Commandant of the Marine Corps directed the studies of ethical leadership, Law of War, escalation of force and Rules of Engagement occur at every phase of the training continuum beginning with the MCRD's and the SOI's.<sup>34</sup>

These two institutions are critical pressure points the Marine Corps uses to instill and maintain the warrior ethos. Recruit training's charter is to ensure the recruit embodies Marine Corps core values and has earned the title Marine. As General

Krulak states in *First to Fight*, “The entire recruit training process is dedicated to developing this sense of brotherhood, interdependence, and determination to triumph.”<sup>35</sup>

It is this sense of belonging and unity that leads to courageous acts on the battlefield and builds a sense of cohesion that the fear of letting down a fellow Marine is greater than any other fear on the battlefield. As Christopher Coker states in *The Warrior Ethos*, “The warrior lives for and through other people, principally his friends. The warrior may be asked to sacrifice themselves for their fellow warriors. The warrior will do this not because they desire it but because it is in their nature, a nature revealed through military education and training<sup>36</sup>” The military education and training Coker refers to begins at the MCRD continued through to the School Of Infantry.

At SOI, the new Marine trains on proven timeless physical skills to employ lethal weapon systems but is educated in judgment, ethical decisions and instills the warrior mindset. The warrior mindset believes that every Marine is a rifleman and mission failure is not acceptable. This formal instruction is how a warrior ethos is truly first entrenched on new Marines. The warrior ethos encompasses the duties towards enemies, and it provides for the possibility of an ethically conceived life to ensure warrior is aware of moral consequence.<sup>37</sup> SOI ensures Marines understand not only the legal obligations on rules of engagement and the law of armed conflict, but understand the moral principles and consequences behind every decision a Marine makes.

### Traits of a Warrior

The list of attributes or traits to define a warrior is extensive. The two distinctive traits that best exemplify a warrior are discipline and sacrifice. These traits are a facet of character, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and overall value to the individual Marine and represents Marine Corps values and culture.

Discipline is the cornerstone of all combat readiness and the foundation that allows a Marine to function as a warrior and embody the warrior ethos. Merriam Webster's on-line dictionary defines discipline as, "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character with a pattern of behavior and self-control."<sup>38</sup> The conventional definition of discipline is "to physically punish" used as a verb, this practice is not conducive to the traits of a warrior.

Early U.S. military history recognized the significance of discipline and its direct impact on combat effectiveness. In a July 1759 Letter of Instruction to the captains of the Virginia Regiment, George Washington observed, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable, procures success to the weak, and esteem to all."<sup>39</sup> Military discipline is performing the correct behavior for the proper motive without direct supervision.

Small acts may not appear to have a huge impact to the individual Marine but affect the group as a whole. Discipline in small daily assignments result in the application of discipline for larger more meaningful tasks. The basic adherence to published standards of conduct without direct coercion communicates devotion to discipline. In combat, the proper execution of small tasks may mean the distinction between life and death. The proper wearing of personal protective equipment in spite of extreme heat illustrates the application of discipline in the small things. In an improvised explosive device attack, failure to follow published rules and regulations for the wear of protective equipment may result in the loss of eyesight.

Unit discipline is critical for effectiveness in the current operating environment. The discipline of the unit originates from the Marines themselves. Every Marine submits

to stated rules and authorities, to be a member of the unit. Traditional principles like uniformity and cleanliness of the unit area signify a disciplined unit, and while they are not an end to themselves, they assess the status of individual and the corporate understanding of standards and obedience.<sup>40</sup> Unit and individual discipline does not commence with the arrival in combat. Discipline is a character trait developed over time through practice and is the product of strong leadership, rigid training, and adherence to standards. A disciplined unit of Marines demonstrates self-respect, hope, compassion, and inner strength all qualities for a warrior to be successful in today's complex environment.

Discipline allows the Marine Corps to adhere to its war fighting philosophy of maneuver warfare and mission command. Mission command as defined in Marine Corps Operating Concepts states that it is rooted in service culture and fundamental to our warrior spirit an ethos that gives decision authority to decentralized leaders and guides the character development of Marines.<sup>41</sup> This warfighting concept is critical for success in the current operating environment. The concept is completely dependent upon leaders at the lowest level seizing the initiative and exploiting available opportunities. This bold behavior must be in concert with the commander's intent and as always stay faithful to Marine Corps' core values. Decentralized execution in combat must be the norm and discipline gives the individual the greatest latitude for freedom of thought and action while promoting his acceptance of responsibility towards the group.<sup>42</sup>

The depth of discipline required for a warrior is far beyond what a normal individual requires. Warriors are bound by an oath to a commitment and do not have the option to quit. Christopher Coker argues that the bond between warriors is greater

than just a legal contract signed by an individual when they volunteer for service. Coker argues the commitment is a covenant, it is not limited to specific conditions, and circumstances, covenants tend to be open ended and long lasting and rarely involve individual advantage.<sup>43</sup> This covenant unknowingly forces the warrior into having the moral discipline to adhere to rules not based on fear but because of conscience and they listen to their hearts.<sup>44</sup> Marines adhere to a warrior ethos because they do not wish to dishonor their unit, their flag, or traditions.

The second essential trait for the development of a warrior is the trait of sacrifice. Sacrifice resembles the Marine Corps leadership trait identified as selfless service. The use of the term sacrifice is a better representation for the warrior. The willingness to subordinate personal desires, rights and even life itself for a greater good is essential to effectiveness on the battlefield but incongruous with mans basic behaviors.<sup>45</sup> The willingness to place the needs of their fellow warriors, unit, and country ahead of their own personal ambitions and desires is the essence of sacrifice. This level of sacrifice is mandatory for a Marine to embody the warrior ethos.

There are many examples throughout Marine Corps history that illustrates the warrior trait of sacrifice. President Obama recognized the most recent example with the awarding of the Medal of Honor to Sergeant Dakota Meyer on 15 September 2011. An extract from Sergeant Meyer's Medal of Honor citation illustrates his actions.

The patrol was ambushed by more than 50 enemy fighters firing rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, machine guns from four to five positions on the slopes above. Hearing over the radio that four U.S. team members were cut off, Cpl. Meyer seized the initiative... Despite shrapnel wound to his arm, Cpl. Meyer made two more trips into the ambush area ...to recover more wounded Afghan soldiers and search for the missing U.S. team members... the six-hour battle significantly disrupted the enemy's attack and inspired the members of the command force to fight on.<sup>46</sup>



Sgt Meyer was questioned about his decision making process as he committed this act of bravery and sacrifice. Sgt Meyer replied with the following, "I didn't think I was going to die. I knew I was."<sup>47</sup> Despite the acknowledgment that he would most likely die, he continued for the preservation of his fellow warriors, both Marines and Afghan soldiers.

Sacrifice is a part of Marine Corps culture embedded into a recruit's mind ensuring that all recruits understand that the unit is more important than individual accomplishment. This mindset of sacrifice continues for the remainder of a Marine's time in the Marine Corps where they believe the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

In a democratic society, the warrior has a covenant with more than just their fellow warriors they have a covenant with the American society they serve. This covenant forms a "sacred trust." According to General Douglass McArthur, this sacred trust is at the very heart of the warrior ethos and sacrificing oneself for the weak and unarmed was the very essence and reason of a warrior's being.<sup>48</sup> The Marine Corps is very aware of the sacred trust they have with America and breaking faith with American society threatens the very existence of the overall Marine Corps. This was evident in 1957 and still holds true today.

In 1957 General Pate, then Commandant of the Marine Corps asked the influential question, "Why does the U.S. need a Marine Corps?" Lieutenant General Krulak, then Commander Fleet Marine Forces Pacific answered with the following,

In terms of cold mechanical logic, the US does not need a Marine Corps. However, the U.S. wants a Marine Corps for three reasons...they believe when trouble comes to our country there will be Marines to do something about it...Marines always turn in a performance that is dramatically successful...they believe that the Marine Corps is downright good for the manhood of our country.<sup>49</sup>

The Marine Corps warrior ethos is what America expects from her Marines. America believes in the institution of the Marine Corps and has an unyielding attachment to the Marines that serve the nation. The sacrifice of Marines solidifies the bond between the nation and the Marine Corps. The Marines failure to uphold the nation's values while conducting operations in the current environment may severe this bond and respect from the American people.<sup>50</sup>

### Warrior Ethos Failures

There have been multiple failures in recent combat operations where Marines have failed to uphold the sacred trust with America and maintain their warrior ethos. The Hamdania Iraq incident provides an example of unethical conduct by Marines in a combat zone.

On 26 April 2006 in Hamdania, Iraq Marines from 2d Platoon, Company K, 3d Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines, kidnapped and killed Hasham Ibrahim Awad. ...a squad of Marines led by Sergeant Larry Hutchins determined they would seize and kill a known insurgent (Saleh Gowad) who had been captured and released on three previous occasions. The Marines agreed in advance that if they could not find the insurgent they would "get someone else." The squad went to the home of the insurgent but could not find him, so they went next-door and pulled Awad from his house. They then proceeded to bind his hands and feet, dragged him to the roadside and dug a hole. Sergeant Hutchins shot Awad in the head; Corporal Thomas shot Awad in the chest. Sergeant Hutchins then performed a 'dead check' by shooting Awad in the head twice. Sergeant Hutchins called his command post and asked for permission to fire on an insurgent. Lance Corporal Pennington pressed Awad's hands onto a shovel the Marines had brought with them to stage a scene making it appear as if Awad was planting an IED. Hospitalman 3d Class Bacos fired an AK-47 into the air and placed a rifle next to Awad. Upon return from patrol Sergeant Hutchins stated, 'Congrats gents, we just got away with murder'.<sup>51</sup>

These Marines were eventually held accountable for their actions but what is not discussed is the impact those tactical actions had on the overall strategic situation. The clear violations of their warrior ethos resulted in the questioning of the conduct and

morality of not only those Marines but also Marines at large. The incident in Hamdinia delayed support for the Marines from the populace for months. This fact illustrates the importance of protecting civilians in the current strategic environment. The indiscriminate killing of civilians causes an erosion of trust within units between seniors and subordinates. This erosion of trust impedes the unit's ability to conduct decentralized operations adhering to mission command.

At Sergeant Hutchins court martial Lance Corporal Pennington subsequently stated, 'We were sick of the ROE and decided to write our own rules'.<sup>52</sup> A criminal act like Hamdinia cracks the foundation of the Marine Corps values and calls into question the warrior ethos. Such a breakdown in the warrior ethos also undermines the ability to accomplish the mission and successfully prosecute a counter insurgency.

#### Why Incidents Occur

The contributing factors to most failures of the Marine Corps warrior ethos ties back to leadership and command climate. In an earlier incident, three weeks prior to the murder, Phan had placed an unloaded pistol in the mouth of a detainee and had ordered Sergeant Hutchins (squad leader from incident) to blood choke the second detainee. Phan then proceeded to spray soda on both detainees telling them it was acid.<sup>53</sup> Phan demonstrated to the Sergeant that it was acceptable to disregard standing rules of engagement, moral responsibilities, and ethical considerations if it was necessary to accomplish the mission.

Two years later Second Lieutenant Phan wrote a letter on Sergeant Hutchins behalf. Phan's own words expressed the following,

Through poor leadership and even poorer command guidance we lost our sense of purpose....we took actions that seemed acceptable at that time but upon reflection now seem morally reprehensible. My motives were

good and intentions good, but that did not matter. By my example, I gave implicit approval for further violations of the ROE. I truly believe that Sergeant Hutchins would not have attempted this operation had I demonstrated proper leadership and our commanders provided better guidance and purpose.<sup>54</sup>

The commander at all levels from platoon and higher, institutes the command climate for a unit. An unwillingness to hold individuals accountable for their actions, encouragement of individuality at the expense of the fighting team or the ethical capitulation of senior ranking personnel sends the wrong message to Marines. The failure to reinforce the Marine Corps' warrior ethos leads to incidents that do not adhere to Marine Corps standards and the warrior traits of discipline and sacrifice. General John A. Lejeune stated in the Marine Corps Manual of 1921 that, "officers, especially commanding officers are responsible for the physical, mental and moral welfare as well as the discipline and training of the young men and women under their command and serving the nation in the Marine Corps."<sup>55</sup>

#### Warrior Ethos Improvements

The Marine Corps must ensure adherence to the warrior ethos and make certain that a Marine is able to keep their honor clean to have success in the current operating environment. The adherence to and intuitive understanding of the core values of honor, courage and commitment must be re-emphasized. The mastering of core values is essential to their understanding. Jack E. Hoban argues that the Marine Corps core values are moral values because they apply consistently to both friend and foe. These values apply even if the cultural or behavioral values of the people encountered do not always seem worthy of such high standards.<sup>56</sup>

The majority of Marines are familiar with core values at a basic level but fail to understand the application process across the spectrum of conflict. Unfortunately, in

the Hamdania incident Marines failed to understand what the core values entailed. The Hamdania Marines justified the act of murder incorrectly believing the act benefited the unit. This situation places Marines in a moral dilemma, through the warrior trait of sacrifice Marines believe that if the unit profits then the actions are justifiable. The Marines at Hamdania used situational ethics and applied flawed logic to their actions. However, if those Marines understood how the core values applied evenly to all human beings across the battlefield they would have recognized that everyone has the right to life and any failure in morality discredits the entire unit.

The foundation of ethical warrior ship is that 'all men are created equal'. This pertains to an intrinsic value of life, not to any relative value, such as culture, ethnicity, religion, or behavior.<sup>57</sup> Marines must appreciate the intrinsic value of life in order to conduct successful operations in today's complex environment. In unlimited wars of the past, the intrinsic value of life was less a concern for an individual Marine. The basic principle was to kill the enemy in the most expedient, ruthless manner possible or the mission would fail. There was little concern for collateral damage or the value of life for non-combatants. The 2006 MHAT IV survey illustrates that individual Marines do not grasp these ethical standards.

- Only 38% of Marines believed all non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect
- Only 24% of Marines would risk their own safety to help a non-combatant in danger
- 17% of Marines believed all non-combatants should be treated as insurgents<sup>58</sup>

The implementation of the warrior ethos to value all life was not effective in Iraq in 2006 according to the data from the MHAT survey. The Marine Corps instituted multiple training programs based upon the final analysis from this MHAT survey. However, there is no updated data to show a change in attitudes. The author recommends that the conduct of an additional MHAT survey occur to validate the Marine Corps renewed emphasis on values based training. This updated MHAT survey should occur every two years while combat operations are ongoing to capture changes in attitudes along with a different theater of operations (Afghanistan). This updated survey would confirm or deny the validity of current training initiatives.

The best location for reinforcement of the warrior ethos is in the Marine Corps Enlisted Professional Military Education (EPME) program. Professional Military Education is highly valued for Marines of all ranks. EPME is an investment in human capital and provides an opportunity to develop leaders, sustain the warrior ethos, and professionalize the Non-Commissioned and Staff Non-Commissioned ranks. Leadership is the product of a shared value system placing the organization first and the individual last.<sup>59</sup> The practice of placing the needs of the institution before the individual is a common characteristic in a warrior culture.

The EPME program has made significant strides over the last decade with respect to educating enlisted Marines on topics like basic combat skills, leadership, and training. Currently some Marines see EPME as just another “check in the box” to be more competitive for promotion. Commanders must view EPME as an opportunity to professionalize the enlisted ranks of the Corps.

A core competency for the EPME must be the “re-greening” of a Marine NCO or SNCO in their warrior ethos. Jack E. Hoban describes an approach to reinforce ethical values. Hoban maintains the use of the moral compass for Marine’s actions. According to Hoban, life is the “true north” of the moral compass and the ethical warrior orients himself due north using the dual life-value...Marines do kill people but Marines kill to protect life.<sup>60</sup>

Commanders at all levels are responsible for the well-being of the spiritual health of their Marines and the unit. Marine units must return to the basics as the last decade of combat operations draws to a close. The definition of the basics is adherence to good order and discipline, maintaining standards and not possessing a sense of entitlement because of a combat deployment. The commander establishes this adherence to the basics by developing a command climate that adheres to the warrior ethos.

A commander cannot tolerate violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Commander’s lack of action on ethical violations sends the wrong message to their Marines. That message states that it is acceptable to violate your core values and warrior ethos as long as it was justified. As a commander ignores the breach of sacred trust among Marine warriors a climate begins to take hold that allows Marines to choose when they want to obey orders and regulations. A climate that tolerates selective obedience to orders reinforces to the unit that any action that can be justified is acceptable.

Commanders must hold Marines accountable for a clear violation of ethics and morals. The investigation of un-ethical behavior must occur and if found true the

command adjudicates it appropriately. The command climates that remain true to battlefield ethics, discipline, sacrifice, and embody the warrior ethos will have the most significant impact on Marines actions.

### Conclusion

The Marine Corps has almost a majestic halo that surrounds its presence today thanks in part to history, most notably from the unlimited warfare of World War II. Present day Marines operate in the most complex environment of warfare in history. The threats and challenges are numerous, dangerous and partially unknown at this time. The restraints placed upon modern day warfare to coincide with limited war result in unique challenges. Part of the danger in today's environment is the acceptance of risk for the benefit of non-combatants. This risk acceptance and discriminate use of force increases moral dilemmas for Marines on the field of battle.

The decentralized operations that characterize the current methods of warfighting require a strong trust between seniors and subordinates. The responsibilities and decisions these junior Marines acquire involve life and death and have strategic implications on the entire operating environment. Unfortunately, there have and will continue to be ethical hiccups where Marines fail to uphold their warrior ethos.

The Marine Corps can combat these ethical problems by re-educating Marines on values and ensuring that Marines have a basic value of all lives. The method of re-education comes in many forms. The establishment of ethical command climates that do not tolerate immoral behavior and holds Marine accountable for their actions is the most effective means. EPME educates the future leaders of the Marine Corps ensuring that there is a shared understanding of the warrior ethos among all Marines. There is not a complete lack of discipline or unethical behavior within the Marine Corps.



However, violations of the Marine Corps warrior ethos start small and eventually lead to reprehensible acts that cost lives, and endanger the sacred trust with Marine warriors.

## Endnotes

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