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Beyond Break-Falls MCMAP and the Will to Fight

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Abstract: Based on the Marine Corps' expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept, small units operating in isolation make individual character operationally imperative. This poses a challenge that weapons cannot solve: sustaining a Marine's will to fight in austere and dispersed conditions. The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) provides the solution. Established in 2000, MCMAP was designed to forge an indomitable will to fight that transcends weapons and technology. As the program marks its 25th anniversary, it has drifted from that founding purpose—character development has been overshadowed by physical techniques and belt progression. To preserve the modern Marine's will to fight, the Corps must restore MCMAP to its original mission: forging the ethical warrior ethos that defines professional arms. This article examines MCMAP's original design through military history, spiritual fitness research, and Marine Corps doctrine, arguing that MCMAP was built to forge character, not chase belts.

Keywords: Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, MCMAP, will to fight, spiritual fitness, character development, virtue ethics, ethical warrior, expeditionary advanced base operations, EABO

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Introduction

The will to fight wins wars. Recent conflicts demonstrate this truth: Ukrainian troops armed with Cold War-era weapons are defeating a Russian force equipped with modern tanks and artillery. Meanwhile, Afghan National Security Forces collapsed in 2021 despite two decades of American training and billions spent on advanced equipment. The difference? One side had the will to fight. The other did not. These examples affirm a timeless military truth: the will to fight wins wars, not equipment alone. Material capabilities and technological superiority matter, but dismissing the will to fight as a romanticized abstraction ignores what Carl von Clausewitz, Ardant du Picq, George C. Marshall, and George S. Patton understood: wars are won by humans, not hardware.

Today's operating environment magnifies this reality. Based on the Marine Corps' expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept, small teams operate in isolation, far from headquarters support, making dispersed forces the center of gravity for success.¹ A corporal making a call in the field can have strategic implications and shift an entire campaign. The question becomes unavoidable: How does the Marine Corps forge the warriors who will not falter when isolated and who make the right call when nobody is watching?

Recognizing that conventional combat training cannot forge the will to fight required for distributed operations, the Marine Corps created MCMAP in 2000 to deliberately cultivate warrior ethos. The Marine Corps Commandants conceived of MCMAP not as a mere combatives system, but as an ethics-based program with character development at its core, designed to forge the "inner citadel" of moral fortitude, distinguishing professional warriors from mere killers.² Yet, as MCMAP marks its 25th anniversary, the program has drifted from its character-centered mission.³ This drift is a result

¹ *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023), 2-1. This document outlines the EABO concept of employing "smaller . . . and more dispersed formations" that must operate "in a distributed environment with limited support and resources." See also, LtCol John T. Quinn II, USMC (Ret), "EABO," *Marine Corps Gazette* 107, no. 2 (February 2023): 8–10. Quinn argues that EABO addresses emerging threats and enhances capabilities in contested environments while affirming its strategic relevance.

² The authors use the term *inner citadel* to mean the soul's guiding principle, which cannot be swayed by external events.

³ A comprehensive empirical study of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) has yet to be conducted. Therefore, there is no objective data proving this drift from character development. However, the authors' assertion that MCMAP has drifted from character development in favor of physical techniques required for belt progression comes from decades of experience, officer inputs concerning the topic, and enlisted instructor discussions that all affirm that belt progression comes before character education.

of many competing requirements: unit training priorities, deployments, lack of MCMAP instructors, and a multitude of time consuming administrative tasks. However, to meet EABO's operational demands, the Marine Corps must restore MCMAP from institutional drift toward belt progression to its foundational purpose: forging the inner citadel of character required to sustain the will to fight.

This article traces that recovery, linking MCMAP's moral foundations to empirical evidence that character development is not ancillary to combat readiness but its core. The first section establishes the doctrinal and scientific foundation, presenting evidence that spiritual fitness functions as operational armor, protecting against moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while enhancing combat resilience. The second section analyzes MCMAP's original design as a holistic system integrating lethal combatives with character formation, contrasting this with its institutional drift toward belt progression rather than ethical development. It argues that Force Design's emphasis on distributed operations based on concepts like EABO makes this character dimension mission-critical. The article concludes by reaffirming MCMAP's core purpose: forging ethical warriors whose character fuels the indomitable will to fight.

The Inner Citadel: The Spiritual Imperative in Modern Warfare

The will to fight is an intangible, yet critical component of military effectiveness that cannot be replaced by technology. This tension between human spirit and military machinery recurs throughout the study of warfare. Carl von Clausewitz first articulated it, arguing that moral and spiritual forces are the ultimate determinants in war.⁴ Christopher Coker illustrates this through General George S. Patton's critique of World War I Germany: despite building the world's most sophisticated war machine, German forces neglected "the battery," or what Patton called the soul, that "implausible something" that dominates material factors.⁵ As Coker explains, while the "soul may be intangible [it nonetheless] exercises a powerful influence on our lives. In the case of the warrior it is what makes war an intensely existential experience."⁶ Today, this same tension and

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 184–85, argues that moral forces of courage and discipline often prove more decisive than material factors.

⁵ Christopher Coker, *The Warrior Ethos: Military Culture and the War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16, posits that the intangible warrior soul exercises decisive combat influence, rendering war an existential experience irreplaceable by technology or material advantage.

⁶ Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 16, clarifies that Patton used the term *soul* nonreligiously, referring to unconscious emotion rather than spirituality.

question regarding the primacy of the interior will to fight (i.e., the warrior's soul) has intensified as artificial intelligence and autonomous systems (i.e., the military machinery) assume increasingly central roles in determining battlefield outcomes.⁷ Four successive Commandants designed MCMAP to cultivate both combatives skills and character in the individual warfighter. By doing so, they implicitly aligned with Clausewitz and Patton's emphasis on moral fortitude as the decisive factor in war. This character-centered design anticipated what the Marine Corps would later formalize as spiritual fitness—that “implausible something” which sustains resilience under fire.⁸

Forging the Ethical Warrior

Designed to weld character development with combatives skills, MCMAP effectively inculcates the will to fight in Marines. It does so by deliberately cultivating three interdependent psychological pillars that sustain combat effectiveness. These pillars form the architecture of the inner citadel, the strength of spirit built on three foundations. First, identity fusion, which is the visceral bond between Marine and unit. Second, trust in the group's leaders and values. Third, spiritual formidability, which is strength of belief in the cause.⁹ Together, these elements transform biological self-preservation into what Coker identifies as the “triumph of culture over our biological drive to survive.”¹⁰ MCMAP institutionalizes this transformation through integrated training that fuses physical combatives with ethical instruction. Lieutenant Colonel William R. Speigle describes this as a “unique and transformational experience” that instills the character traits of sacrifice and discipline.¹¹ This approach reflects Don M. Snider, Major John A. Nagl, and Major Tony Pfaff's conception of professional

⁷ August Cole, “Ghost in the Machine: Coming to Terms with the Human Core of Unmanned War,” *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2025), <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/59560>, asserts that Western reliance on unmanned systems is illusory; under technological parity, only large human armies achieve decisive outcomes.

⁸ Cdr David A. Daigle, CHC, USN, LtCol Daniel V. Goff, USMC (Ret), and Cdr Peter N. Ott, CHC, USN, “From Bayonets to Black Belts: The Evolution of USMC Close Combat and MCMAP,” *Marine Corps History* 12, no. 1 (forthcoming), traces MCMAP's institutionalization to ground close combat training in character formation rather than physical technique alone.

⁹ Ángel Gómez, Alexandra Vázquez, and Scott Atran, “Transcultural Pathways to the Will to Fight,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 24 (2023): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2303614120>, finds that warrior ethos represents culture's triumph over self-preservation through shared identity and cohesion.

¹⁰ Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 128, argues that warrior ethos represents culture's triumph over self-preservation, enabling soldiers to overcome survival instincts through shared identity and cohesion.

¹¹ LtCol William R. Speigle II, USMC, “The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos: Practicality for Today's Operating Environment” (unpublished paper, Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 2013), abstract, notes that sacrifice and discipline are forged through entry-level training's transformational experience.

military ethics that links the subordination of self-interest to mission accomplishment and the acceptance of self-sacrificial risk.¹²

MCMAP cultivates a warrior spirit that operates across two critical dimensions that the program addresses simultaneously. The instrumental dimension develops the Marine as a lethal public servant of the state, mastering the physical and tactical skills required for combat effectiveness. The existential dimension addresses the warrior's personal search for meaning and honor through self-trust and sacrifice. Conceptually, MCMAP's integrated design recognizes that these dimensions cannot be separated—technical proficiency without moral foundation produces mere killers, while ethical formation without tactical competence produces ineffective idealists. The deliberate fusion of these dimensions enables MCMAP to build both *spiritual fitness*, defined as “inner strength from higher purposes,” and *character*, the moral compass required to wield lethality ethically.¹³ This fusion forms the engine that powers the warrior spirit and produces the indomitable will to fight that modern dispersed operations demand.¹⁴ But forging the warrior is only one-half the equation. What happens when that ethical warrior enters the crucible of actual combat?

The Combat-Ready Warrior: Steeled for the Fight

Modern combat immerses the warrior in a paradoxical state of moral peril and savage joy, a crucible where moral resilience depends entirely on a preexisting ethical framework. Combat-decorated Marine Karl Marlantes famously describes this as entering the “Temple of Mars”—a realm where the lines between exultation and terror, humanity and savagery, blur.¹⁵ As a young lieutenant leading a rifle platoon in Vietnam's highland jungle in 1968, Marlantes learned this truth firsthand: the Marine Corps had taught him the ritual of killing but not its meaning. In his book *What It Is Like to Go to War*, Marlantes writes of becoming conscious that he had entered a temple where humans were sacrificed and he served as priest. Yet, this 23-year-old Marine-priest had attended only a

¹² Maj John A. Nagl, Maj Tony Pfaff, and Don M. Snider, *Army Professionalism, The Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 1999), 27, establishes self-sacrificial risk as foundational to military professionalism and moral leadership.

¹³ *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Marine Corps Reference Publication 6-10.1 with Change 1 (Quantico, VA: Training and Education Command, 2024), 1-1, defines *spiritual fitness* as inner strength from higher purposes, derived from sources ranging from personal faith to shared sacrifice and character, that enables Marines to live out the warfighting ethos.

¹⁴ Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 7, distinguishes between instrumental and existential dimensions of warrior identity, with most soldiers inhabiting only one.

¹⁵ For further analysis on what it is like to enter the Temple of Mars, see Cdr David A. Daigle, CHC, USN, LtCol Daniel V. Goff, USMC (Ret), and LtCol Christopher Reardon, USMC, “Entering the Temple of Mars: Why There Is No Substitute for the Spiritual in War, *Expeditions with MCUP* (4 November 2024): 45–46, <https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2024.08>, which argues that entering the Temple of Mars without spiritual grounding to navigate blurred lines between humanity and savagery leaves warriors vulnerable to moral injury.

seminary called The Basic School, which trained him in lethal technique without preparing him for the profound moral and psychological weight of taking human life.¹⁶ Marlantes and the young Marines he led were ill-prepared for the psychological and spiritual crucible of combat and its aftermath.

Of his time in combat, Marlantes writes of a “deep savage joy in destruction . . . a joy beyond ego enhancement,” an ecstasy he likens to “religious ecstasy.”¹⁷ His experience is not a modern anomaly but an ancient component of the warrior experience, or what the Greeks called *charmê*—a “rejoicing in the joy of battle.”¹⁸ As Coker explains, this sensation is an intensely existential experience, an “adrenaline rush” where warriors feel most alive.¹⁹ This response is driven by the sympathetic nervous system releasing chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol, which heighten alertness and prepare the body for survival.²⁰ In combat, this physiological response serves its evolutionary purpose. But this same response, when chronically activated in garrison through overtraining, poor nutrition, and inadequate sleep, transforms into a destructive force that erodes a Marine’s health, readiness, and spirit.²¹

But this transcendent state of combat is a double-edged sword. When a warrior enters the Temple of Mars with a “spiritual vacuum,” having been taught the ritual of killing but not its meaning, the experience can be catastrophic.²² When paired with grief and rage, moral inhibitions collapse, leading to what psychologist Jonathan Shay calls the “berserk state.” This state enables warriors to dehumanize their enemy, but it leads to the dehumanization of themselves—a state in which they often feel “godlike,” without moral limit or fear.²³ Modern training methods can override humanity’s innate resistance to killing, but without an ethical framework to process this act, the psychological costs are profound and lasting.²⁴ Modern combat immerses warriors in a “savage

¹⁶ Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011), 63, describes combat as intensely spiritual, while noting the Marine Corps taught killing’s ritual without providing ethical framework to process its moral weight.

¹⁷ Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*, 63, characterizes combat’s “savage joy” as religious ecstasy where warriors feel intensely alive, but without ethical grounding collapses into moral injury.

¹⁸ Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 27, invokes Homer’s *charmei gethosunoi* to show this savage exhilaration is ancient and universal, not modern.

¹⁹ Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 66, observes that warrior memoir captures war’s intoxication, making warriors feel intensely alive despite institutional efforts to discourage such rejoicing.

²⁰ GySgt Miguel Zeran, USMC (Ret), “The Marine Corps Must Locate, Close with, and Destroy Stress,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 144, no. 11 (November 2018): 2, explains stress response physiology while arguing Marine Corps culture enables chronic stress through overtraining, poor nutrition, and inadequate recovery, undermining readiness.

²¹ Zeran, “The Marine Corps Must Locate, Close with, and Destroy Stress.”

²² Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*, 63.

²³ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 84–86.

²⁴ Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1995), 149.

joy” that mirrors religious ecstasy, but this transcendent state demands ethical grounding. Only a deliberately cultivated framework, rooted in communal accountability and sacred duty, can prevent this experience from collapsing into the moral injury of the berserk state. Combat, however, retains a paradoxical kinship with mystical experience: an awareness of death, focused presence, and profound sense of both self-sacrifice and communal belonging. Coker identifies this as the “awesome” experience of battle found in Leo Tolstoy’s work, where a warrior discovers his “affinity with other men” and finds a brotherhood “in the midst of carnage and the chaos of battle.”²⁵

This paradox demands a sense of purpose to navigate the crucible of combat. The commitment to overcome fear is rooted less in self-preservation but in accountability to fellow warriors and a sense of sacred duty—a search for meaning even within chaos and destruction. Beyond loyalty or ideals, the will to persevere is often fueled by what Eyal Lewin identifies as “collective optimism,” a psychologically cultivated belief in victory that builds resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming odds.²⁶ The will to fight is profoundly strengthened when purpose, whether grounded in comradeship or national ideals, acquires what Lewin calls a spiritual dimension. Lewin describes this “spiritual transcendence” as a unique motivational force that empowers human action across multiple life domains, enabling warriors to fight for shared goals beyond their immediate survival.²⁷

Spiritual Fitness as an Evolving Concept in the Department of Defense

During the past 15 years, the Department of Defense and Marine Corps have elevated spiritual fitness from peripheral wellness program to doctrinal combat readiness requirement, formalizing what commanders like Lieutenant General John A. Lejeune intuitively understood: spiritual strength determines victory. In 2011, responding to the unprecedented psychological and moral strains of prolonged post-9/11 warfare, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff released the Total Force Fitness (TFF) framework as a holistic initiative designed to create a “methodology for understanding, assessing, and maintaining service members’ well-being and sustaining their ability to carry out missions” in or-

²⁵ Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 82, uses Tolstoy to show that combat’s transcendent “affinity with other men” unites, rather than dehumanizes, but only when grounded in shared purpose.

²⁶ Eyal Lewin, “The Secret Weapon of Optimism,” in *Military Psychology: Concepts, Trends and Interventions*, ed. Nidhi Maheshwari and Vineeth V. Kumar (New Delhi: SAGE Publication, 2016), 189–90, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885854.n10>.

²⁷ Lewin, “The Secret Weapon of Optimism,” 196.

der to “optimize performance and build and sustain resilience.”²⁸ The connection between spiritual fitness and combat effectiveness becomes explicit in the framework’s definition. It characterizes spiritual fitness as “the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions.”²⁹ By defining spiritual fitness in terms of its direct contribution to mission accomplishment, the TFF establishes institutional precedent for treating spiritual readiness as mission-critical rather than merely a wellness initiative.³⁰ This values-centric approach mirrors Rand’s definition of the *will to fight*, which is “the disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed.”³¹ The TFF remains belief-neutral, allowing each servicemember to develop their own foundation for inner strength and ethical action. Rather than prescribing specific beliefs or a specific religion, it focuses on the internal spiritual or philosophical framework that enables perseverance under extreme conditions.

The Marine Corps has championed this approach through institutional directives. Three consecutive Commandants affirmed spiritual fitness as essential to combat readiness. General Robert B. Neller initiated this emphasis with his 2016 *Spiritual Fitness All Marine Corps Activities* (ALMAR).³² General David H. Berger reinforced it through his 2020 *Resiliency and Spiritual Fitness* ALMAR.³³ General Eric M. Smith continued this trajectory in his 2024 *Spiritual Fitness* ALMAR, framing it as an essential component of Marine Corps Total Fitness (MCTF), an integrated framework that incorporates physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness as interconnected domains of combat readiness.³⁴

²⁸ *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 3405.01, Chairman’s Total Force Fitness Framework* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1 September 2011), 1, 9, establishes eight fitness domains including spiritual fitness as foundational for optimizing warfighter performance and resilience and defines the framework’s purpose as optimizing servicemember performance and sustaining mission accomplishment capacity under physical, psychological, and moral demands.

²⁹ *CJCSI 3405.01, Chairman’s Total Force Fitness Framework, A-2.*

³⁰ *CJCSI 3405.01, Chairman’s Total Force Fitness Framework.*

³¹ Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), 6, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341>.

³² *ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 3 October 2016), establishes spiritual fitness as a command responsibility and core readiness requirement, recognizing spiritual development as essential to combat effectiveness.

³³ *ALMAR 027/20, Resiliency and Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 3 December 2020), reinforces earlier emphasis while linking spiritual fitness to force-wide resilience, positioning spiritual development as essential to both individual readiness and organizational capacity to withstand operational stress.

³⁴ *ALMAR 020/24, Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 19 July 2024), reframes spiritual fitness as “inner strength from higher purpose” and mandating it as a command-owned warfighting requirement; and *Marine Corps Total Fitness Strategic Plan* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023), 1–2, establishes MCTF as the science-based framework integrating physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness to enhance warfighting readiness.

Smith's ALMAR reinforced command ownership through the directive that "commanders own spiritual fitness," positioning chaplains as key advisors who help commanders steward this responsibility. This consistent focus on spirituality from the modern Commandants echoes the foundational belief of General John Lejeune, who argued that victory depended on the spiritual strength of his Marines. In his memoirs, Lejeune wrote: "There is no substitute for the spiritual in war. Miracles must be wrought if victories are to be won, and to work miracles, men's hearts must be afire with self-sacrificing love for each other, for their units, for their division, and for their country."³⁵ Lejeune's principle serves as the foundation for the modern Marine Corps' approach to spiritual readiness. Beyond the recent ALMARs and MCTF, the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Marine Corps Reference Publication (MCRP) 6-10.1, acts as the operational bridge, translating Lejeune's vision into a practical framework for every Marine leader.³⁶

Whereas Lejeune spoke of hearts "afire with self-sacrificing love," the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide* provides a belief-neutral toolkit to cultivate that same inner strength and cohesion. It redefines the "spiritual," expanding it beyond a religious matter to become the core of the warfighting ethos, equipping leaders to foster the virtues Lejeune deemed essential for victory.³⁷ While the ALMARs establish strategic purpose the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide* provides an operational method, equipping every leader from corporal to colonel with a standardized framework including definitions, discussion points, and self-assessment tools to develop Marines' spiritual fitness.³⁸ To this end, the publication institutionalizes spiritual fitness as a core warfighting competency and command responsibility at all echelons, positioning it as an integral element of Marine Corps leader development rather than solely a chaplain function.³⁹

This modern approach to spiritual fitness is formally mandated by *Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, which establishes the official framework for a leader's holistic responsibility. The order directs leaders to ground all training in a concept of "fitness" that encompasses the "[p]hysical, mental, spiritual, and social health and well-being" of their Ma-

³⁵ Gen John A. Lejeune, *The Reminiscences of a Marine* (Philadelphia, PA: Dorrance, 1930), 307, asserts that spiritual strength, not material superiority, determines victory, a principle animating the modern Marine Corps' approach through consecutive Commandant ALMARs and TFF.

³⁶ *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide* provides commanders with a belief-neutral framework defining spiritual fitness as "inner strength from higher purpose" and operationalizing it as a measurable leadership responsibility.

³⁷ *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Foreword, 1-1, 1-7, 4-1.

³⁸ *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, 1-1, 3-1, 4-1.

³⁹ *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, 1-7, establishes spiritual fitness as a command-owned, measurable warfighting competency integrated into leader development.

rines.⁴⁰ In this way, spiritual health is directly integrated into the framework of character development, and is officially defined as the “ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions.”⁴¹ The stated purpose of the *MCO 1500.61* framework is “[t]o provide a common framework and practical tools to assist leaders in developing all Marines and Sailors to achieve their full potential and be successful.”⁴² With the three ALMARs, the *Spiritual Fitness Leader’s Guide*, MCTF, and *MCO 1500.61*, the Marine Corps has institutionalized spiritual fitness as a core leadership function, ensuring that the development of a Marine’s inner strength is not left to chance, but is a deliberate and essential component in the forging of a resilient warrior.

Spiritual Fitness: Empirical Evidence of Protective Outcomes

The focus on spiritual fitness stems not just from tradition but from extensive scientific research demonstrating its profound impact on resilience and well-being. The neuroscientific basis for this protection was revealed in a study published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, which found that a strong personal importance of spirituality is correlated with a thicker cerebral cortex in regions of the brain associated with reflection. This neurological marker corresponds to a 90-percent “reduction in relative risk for depression during a 10-year period.”⁴³ Research from Harvard University reinforces this study. The study demonstrates that religious involvement during adolescence, including religious service attendance and prayer or meditation, is associated with better health and well-being in early adulthood, including lower rates of marijuana use, early sexual initiation, and fewer lifetime sexual partners, as well as greater character strengths and life satisfaction. The study explicitly positions religious upbringing as a “protective factor” against various risks during adolescence, a critical developmental window often linked to vulnerabilities like mental health challenges, substance

⁴⁰ *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 28 July 2017), 3, mandates spiritual fitness as one of four integrated dimensions of Marine total fitness alongside physical, mental, and social health, establishing holistic leader responsibility for developing Marines across all domains.

⁴¹ *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, 3, connects spiritual fitness to mission accomplishment, codifying it as operationally necessary, and establishes the doctrinal foundation for MCMAP’s character development.

⁴² *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, 2, completes the institutional architecture by providing standardized tools that integrate spiritual fitness into leader responsibilities, positioning it as essential for combat readiness.

⁴³ Lisa Miller et al., “Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality: A Study of Adults at High and Low Familial Risk for Depression,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 2 (February 2014): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.3067>.

use, and behavioral issues.⁴⁴ Using an “outcome-wide” prospective analysis, the study tracked how adolescent religious involvement predicts positive outcomes into early adulthood (ages 20–28), precisely the age range when most Marines are recruited.⁴⁵

This evidence is especially relevant given that most Marines join during late adolescence, a period of development when they are uncertain of themselves and vulnerable to stress. In fact, the Marine Corps fields the youngest force, recruiting a disproportionately higher concentration of 17-to-24-year-olds than any other Service. For instance, in fiscal year (FY) 2021, 96.8 percent of Marine Corps recruits fell within this age range.⁴⁶ This aligns with the broader DOD trend, with the majority of recruits 17 to 20 years old.⁴⁷ For the Marine Corps, however, this skew is even more pronounced, with the 17–18-year-old cohort accounting for approximately 50 percent of all new recruits.⁴⁸ The Army, by contrast, relied less heavily on this specific age group, with the 17–18-year-old cohort accounting for approximately 33 percent of its new recruits.⁴⁹

The data on the protective effects for this specific age group are conclusive. Clinical psychologist Lisa Miller finds that spirituality is “the most protective factor against depression and substance use and abuse during adolescence known to medical science.”⁵⁰ Her decades of research show that an active spiritual life dramatically reduces risk-taking behaviors, providing a 40–80 percent decreased risk of addiction to alcohol or drugs and an 80 percent decreased risk for developing depression.⁵¹ This aligns with recent research in *JAMA Psychiatry*, which found that regular religious service attendance correlates with a lower risk of “death from despair” (suicide, drugs, or alcohol), though the results differed by gender. For female nurses, attending services at least weekly was linked to a 68 percent lower risk of death from despair and a 75 percent lower risk of

⁴⁴ Ying Chen and Tyler J. VanderWeele, “Associations of Religious Upbringing with Subsequent Health and Well-Being from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: An Outcome-Wide Analysis,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 187, no. 11 (November 2018): 2355–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwy142>.

⁴⁵ Chen and VanderWeele, “Associations of Religious Upbringing with Subsequent Health and Well-Being from Adolescence to Young Adulthood.”

⁴⁶ *Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2021 Summary Report*, Report Number 2024-010 (Washington, DC: Office of People Analytics, U.S. Department of Defense, 2024), 13.

⁴⁷ *Population Representation in the Military Services*.

⁴⁸ *Population Representation in the Military Services*, 14.

⁴⁹ *Population Representation in the Military Services*.

⁵⁰ Lisa Miller, “Spiritual Awakening and Depression in Adolescents: A Unified Pathway or ‘Two Sides of the Same Coin,’” *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 77, no. 4 (2013): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1521/bumc.2013.77.4.332>, asserts that adolescent spiritual awakening protects against depression, substance abuse, and risk-taking, with studies suggesting shared biological basis for resilience.

⁵¹ Lisa Miller, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (New York: Random House, 2021), 51, 61–62.

suicide specifically.⁵² For male health professionals, the same level of attendance was associated with a 33 percent lower risk of death from despair and a 48 percent lower risk of suicide.⁵³

This protective effect extends beyond clinical populations to the general public. Evan M. Kleiman and Richard T. Liu's study of more than 20,000 Americans found that frequent religious service attendance proved to be a long-term protective factor against suicide; even after controlling for other risk factors, those who attended services at least twice a month were 67 percent less likely to die by suicide than those who attended less frequently.⁵⁴ Harold G. Koenig's 2023 research shows that spiritual engagement operates at multiple interconnected levels. At the individual level, it correlates with greater happiness, psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction.⁵⁵ It also fosters a stronger sense of meaning and purpose.⁵⁶ This internal foundation manifests in prosocial behavior: spiritual involvement fosters increased altruism, gratitude, and forgiveness, alongside reduced delinquency and crime.⁵⁷ These individual and behavioral benefits extend to the relational domain, where greater spiritual engagement strengthens social support networks and interpersonal relationships.⁵⁸ Collectively, these factors provide measurable protection against psychological pathology; spiritual engagement consistently links to lower rates of depression,

⁵² Ying Chen et al., "Religious Service Attendance and Deaths Related to Drugs, Alcohol, and Suicide among US Health Care Professionals," *JAMA Psychiatry* 77, no. 7 (2020): 737, 742, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0175>, analyzes the Nurses Health Study II cohort, establishing gender-specific effects.

⁵³ Chen et al., "Religious Service Attendance and Deaths Related to Drugs, Alcohol, and Suicide among US Health Care Professionals," 737, 742, analyzes the Health Professionals Follow-up Study, finding male health professionals attending services weekly demonstrated significantly lower death-from-despair and suicide risk versus nonattenders, confirming protective effects across genders though with reduced magnitude in males.

⁵⁴ Evan M. Kleiman and Richard T. Liu, "Prospective Prediction of Suicide in a Nationally Representative Sample: Religious Service Attendance as a Protective Factor," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 204, no. 4 (2014): 263, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.128900>.

⁵⁵ Cdr David A. Daigle, CHC, USN, LtCol Daniel V. Goff, USMC (Ret), and Harold G. Koenig, MD, MHSc, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy: Stoic Philosophy and Spiritual Fitness for Optimizing Warfighter Readiness," *Expeditions with MCUP* (31 March 2023): 30, <https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2023.03>, provides a systematic review finding that 79 percent of 326 studies link spiritual involvement with improved psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

⁵⁶ Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 30, substantiated by systematic review—42 of 45 studies—correlating spiritual involvement with greater meaning and purpose, demonstrating near-universal empirical support.

⁵⁷ Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 31, documents that spiritual engagement correlates with increased prosocial behaviors, establishing spirituality as protective against negative outcomes.

⁵⁸ Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 31, notes that 80 percent of studies show spiritual involvement correlates with greater social support, strengthening interpersonal bonds critical for resilience.

substance abuse disorders, and suicide risk.⁵⁹ In operational terms, Koenig's findings underscores why moral and spiritual foundations remain indispensable to sustaining the will to fight.

In the military context, this neurological resilience translates directly to warfighter readiness. A pivotal 2010 study in *Military Medicine* confirmed that spiritual fitness positively correlates with resilience and recovery from trauma, prevention of moral injury, and the unit cohesion required for peak performance. David J. Hufford, Matthew J. Fritts, and Jeffrey E. Rhodes list four operationally relevant outcomes: "(1) resilience and recovery from deployment- and combat-related trauma, (2) optimized prevention and/or resolution of moral injury, (3) cohesive unit climate supportive of peak performance, and (4) mature and engaged spirituality that fosters finding meaning/purpose and effective coping."⁶⁰

This research is validated by studies on veteran populations. In a national study of 3,151 U.S. military veterans, Vanshdeep Sharma et al. found that a high level of personal religion/spirituality (R/S) was associated with a decreased risk for lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder, and alcohol use disorder, and was strongly linked with positive psychosocial characteristics such as gratitude, purpose in life, and post-traumatic growth.⁶¹ While programs like combat and operational stress control (COSC) effectively return Marines to duty following acute stress events, systematic reviews indicate these reactive interventions fail to prevent long-term mental health issues, suggesting that proactive spiritual fitness development offers protective benefits that crisis intervention alone cannot provide.⁶²

Spiritual fitness, therefore, is not a wellness program; it is operational armor against psychological casualties. The mechanism matters as much as the metrics—spiritual engagement builds neurological resilience and provides a framework for processing trauma before it occurs. Reactive spirituality proves insufficient when Marines face extreme moral and psychological stress. This is critical for the Marine Corps, which recruits during the developmental window

⁵⁹ Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 32–33, summarizes evidence that spiritual involvement correlates with lower negative mental health outcomes, establishing it as a powerful protective factor for young military populations.

⁶⁰ David J. Hufford, Matthew J. Fritts, and Jeffrey E. Rhodes, "Spiritual Fitness," *Military Medicine* 175, no. 8 (August 2010): 78, <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-10-00075>.

⁶¹ Vanshdeep Sharma et al., "Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health of US Military Veterans: Results from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 217 (August 2017): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.03.071>.

⁶² Mark C. Russell and Charles R. Figley, "Do the Military's Frontline Psychiatry/Combat Operational Stress Control Programs Benefit Veterans? Part Two: Systematic Review of the Evidence," *Psychological Injury and Law* 10, no. 1 (2017): 24–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12207-016-9279-x>.

of late adolescence when such protective factors take deepest root. Programs like COSC treat symptoms after a crisis, whereas spiritual fitness fortifies character before combat demands it. It is, therefore, foundational, not peripheral, to combat readiness.

MCMAP: The Institutional Bridge to the Ethical Warrior

MCMAP bridges the gap between individual spiritual strength and collective ethical accountability, transforming personal conviction into the unit-wide moral frameworks that prevent ethical collapse under combat stress. It is anchored in the deliberate cultivation of character and spiritual resilience, an inner citadel forged long before adversity strikes. However, individual spirituality, while important for personal resilience, cannot guarantee ethical behavior in the crucible of combat. History offers many stark examples—from fanatical units of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany during World War II to the violent extremists of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria today—where profound spiritual or ideological conviction, absent a common ethical framework and shared unit values, fueled destructive actions rather than moral restraint. To safeguard against this, individual spirituality must be tempered and shaped by the collective *esprit de corps* or a deep sense of belonging anchored by collective values. This shared identity cultivates mutual trust, accountability, and a sense of sacred duty to one another and the mission, reinforcing ethical norms amid the chaos of war. This doctrinal approach establishes the “character” discipline as foundational to unit *esprit de corps*, directly linking it to the formation of “ethical warriors.”⁶³ The Marine Corps recognized this imperative decades ago. It built an institutional system to fuse individual spiritual strength with collective values and ethical constraints, ensuring that the warrior’s spirit serves justice rather than descent into savagery. That system is MCMAP.

As the section titled “Spiritual Fitness as an Evolving Concept in the Department of Defense” established, the Marine Corps institutionalized spiritual fitness, a core warfighting attribute through MCMAP. It embedded the concept in promotion requirements, formal training, and unit culture. The program fuses individual conviction with collective moral purpose, building both resilience under adversity and restraint in the use of force. This fusion keeps the will to fight from becoming fanaticism or cruelty. It channels that will toward disciplined, lawful lethality. Yet, MCMAP’s effectiveness depends on fidelity to its founding purpose. The program was designed to forge Marines whose moral and spiritual resilience matches their physical prowess—producing warriors whose character transforms raw aggression into disciplined strength. The sec-

⁶³ *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 2011), chap. 1.

ond part of this article addresses whether MCMAP continues to fulfill that purpose and how its current implementation measures against its original design.

Character and Leadership: Maximizing MCMAP Institutional Drift: When Belt Progression Obscures Purpose

MCMAP is the forge for building a Marine's inner citadel—a holistic system intentionally designed through the efforts of four Commandants to ensure ethical strength is honed alongside physical prowess. The physical discipline of MCMAP demands resilience that serves as the foundation against adversity. The mental discipline trains Marines to remain calm and tactical under pressure. The character discipline instills the core values that bind physical and mental strength into unit cohesion and the will to fight. When faced with the moral and physical shocks of combat, Marines draw on this inner citadel they have painstakingly constructed. This is MCMAP's design—a comprehensive system where combatives training and character formation reinforce one another. Yet, design and execution are not the same. While MCMAP's architecture remains sound, its implementation at the unit level has drifted from the Commandants' original intent.

Understanding that the inner spirit of the warrior could not be left to develop organically, the Marine Corps created MCMAP as an institutional mechanism to deliberately cultivate the warrior ethos in every Marine. As Jack E. Hoban explains, MCMAP was conceived not merely as a combatives system, but as the primary vehicle for creating an “ethical warrior,” with ethics training forming the very core of the program.⁶⁴ It is “an ethics-based combatives program consisting of three main elements: character (ethical warrior training), mental (military skills and mindset training), and physical (martial combatives and combat conditioning). Notably, the ethical warrior training is considered to be the core of the program.”⁶⁵ Its core purpose is to instill a warrior ethos grounded in a respect for life distinguishing a professional warrior from a mere killer.⁶⁶

MCMAP's drift from character development to belt progression has measurable consequences: a 2022 study documented acute declines in moral function following combatives training as evidence that physical technique without ethical formation produces not warriors, but liabilities. This drift ignores what *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, explicitly defines: *character discipline* as “the spiritual aspect of each Marine and the collective spirit of the

⁶⁴ Jack E. Hoban, “The Ethical Marine Warrior,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 91, no. 9 (September 2007): 36, posits MCMAP's “ethical warrior” focus, grounded in the intrinsic value of life, produces more effective and humane warfighters capable of acting as “defender-protectors.”

⁶⁵ Hoban, “The Ethical Marine Warrior.”

⁶⁶ Hoban, “The Ethical Marine Warrior.”

Marine Corps,” designed to “instill the warrior spirit in every Marine.”⁶⁷ To forge the will to fight as the program’s architects intended, an enhanced focus on the leadership and character aspects of MCMAP is more than beneficial—it is mission-critical.

MCMAP teaches Marines to destroy the human body with brutal efficiency; stomp and crush an enemy’s neck and skull, smash in an enemy’s teeth with the butt of a rifle, and thrust a bayonet into the enemy’s chest. The brutality of warfare must be ethically constrained and conducted by warriors of character. If not, excesses will result, inflicting unnecessary suffering upon combatants and civilians alike. A 2022 study of 55 active duty, newly enlisted Marines concluded that MCMAP training resulted in an acute decline in moral function. The research found that during a six-week period, “both moral intention and moral judgment worsened over the visits suggesting a chronic impairment related to time in training and indicating a functional change in ethical decision-making following acute bouts of MCMAP.”⁶⁸ This study demands intensified focus on MCMAP’s character and leadership components, not reduced training. To counteract the documented decline in moral function, character development requires more robust and frequent reinforcement.

This degradation of moral function underscores a deeper truth—no matter how advanced warfare becomes, its outcome still turns on the human will. Despite advances in standoff weaponry and autonomous systems, MCMAP’s hand-to-hand combat training remains doctrinally essential; not as anachronism, but as the crucible where lethal technique and ethical restraint must be forged together. To situate this enduring reality in the digital age, the following analysis examines the relationship between technology and the warrior’s character. The combative techniques taught in MCMAP are essential to the work of a Marine and offer a glimpse into the horrors of hand-to-hand combat that are still relevant today. Despite profound advancements in technological innovation that have changed the character of warfare, the fundamental nature of war remains centered on human beings exerting their will over one another. History is replete with examples where the best-trained and educated soldiers made the most effective use of disruptive new technologies, such as the long-bow, musket, iron ship, airplane, machine gun, tank, and aircraft carrier, to defeat their enemies. Military technology is constantly evolving and requires a properly prepared force to make the most effective use of modern technologies to win the next war. Indeed, drones, cyber, and artificial intelligence will be no different. Given the particularly ferocious form of violence taught, situating this

⁶⁷ *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, 1-3.

⁶⁸ Jacob A. Siedlik et al., “Change in Measures of Moral Function Following Acute Bouts of Marine Corps Martial Arts Training,” *Stress and Health* 38 (2022), 534, <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3109>.

training within a strong ethical framework is critical to ensuring it is wielded by disciplined warfighters. However, George Raudzens argues that “technological determinism” (the belief that superior weapons win wars) is not supported by historical evidence. He concludes that “although technological superiority can be very important in war, technology on its own will seldom decide a war.”⁶⁹ Thus, warfighters possessing the most advanced technology along with a superior will to fight, represent the best opportunity to win wars. Additionally, warfighters imbued with character can help guard against violent excesses in combat and ensure Marines remain military professionals and not well-trained thugs.

Strong character, instilled and reinforced by ethical leaders, fosters the development of resilient Marines and directly contributes to the individual Marine’s will to fight. Their character, defined by mental and moral fortitude, better enables them to withstand spiritual, moral, mental, physical, and social challenges. A solid spiritual foundation and a clear sense of purpose, combined with the active support of chaplains and small unit leaders, can help Marines recover from various hardships, such as the loss of a parent, infidelity in a relationship, setbacks at work, or, in extreme cases, the death of a fellow Marine. To this end, commanders should use all resources available and take every available opportunity to cultivate a Marine’s character, as it is a lifelong endeavor and not merely a guaranteed byproduct of Marine Corps accessions training.

Virtue Ethics: Character Development and the Will to Fight

Aristotelian virtue ethics provides the philosophical framework MCMAP needs to recover its character-development mission: virtue as practiced habit, forged through repetition until ethical action becomes instinctive—precisely the methodology MCMAP already applies to physical combatives. Aristotle taught that virtues, such as courage, represent the mean between two extremes (vices): in the case of courage, between cowardice (deficiency) and recklessness (excess). Moreover, he described courage as an expression of a noble intent, arguing that a “courageous man faces the dangers and performs the actions appropriate to his courage” for the right reasons.⁷⁰ This virtue is not innate; it must be practiced. As Aristotle noted, just as men become builders by building, “we become just by doing just acts.”⁷¹ The intentional habituation of virtues forges habits

⁶⁹ George Raudzens, “War Winning Weapons: The Measure of Technological Determinism in Military History,” *Journal of Military History* 54, no. 4 (October 1990): 432.

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), 129, offers a foundational practical work on ethics exploring “how to best live” not merely to understand the good, but to achieve it.

⁷¹ Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, 91–92.

that lead to an elevation of one's character.⁷² For Aristotle, habits form the foundation of our identity and are pivotal to shaping our future. Will Durant summarized Aristotelian ethics: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."⁷³ This principle already underpins MCMAP's approach to physical combatives, where Marines master techniques through repetitive drilling until movements become instinctive. The same methodology applies to ethical formation: Marines become virtuous warriors not through lectures on abstract principles, but through repeated practice of ethical decision-making in realistic scenarios where character is tested and reinforced.

MCMAP already applies Aristotelian methodology in its physical training. Marines drill techniques through thousands of repetitions until muscle memory replaces conscious thought. Extending this proven habituation principle to character development is not innovation but logical consistency: ethical warriors are forged through repeated practice of right action, not lectures on abstract principles. The Marine Corps and other Service branches must promote character by adopting an Aristotelian approach that focuses on practical habits rather than abstract principles. Chaplain of the Marine Corps rear admiral Carey H. Cash advocates for this "virtue tradition," which he describes as "the study of behaviors and the consequences they bring."⁷⁴ Instead of beginning with complex philosophical debates, leaders can ask a simple question about a Marine's habits: Do they produce a life that flourishes or do they lead to a life that is coming unraveled at the seams? This focus on tangible outcomes makes the classical tradition of character education immediately relevant to the challenges Marines face.

General James N. Mattis and Admiral James B. Stockdale, eminent philosophers of the Department of the Navy, present a unique perspective in this regard, worthy of consideration by all commanders. They view Marines and sailors as both warfighters and philosophical moral agents with the power to choose to act virtuously while also being aware of their susceptibility to vices (bad habits). This perspective empowers Marines and sailors to understand that choosing the right path is not just a decision, and it has a profound transformative power. It can reshape, sharpen instincts and values, embed faithful actions, and fortify the inner citadel as Marines operate in the moral battlespace.

⁷² RAdm Carey H. Cash, CHC, USN, "Character Education in the USMC" (presentation, General Officer Symposium, Quantico, VA, 2 October 2023), 2, argues for a return to classical Aristotelian character education, defining virtue as the habit of excellence resulting from making good decisions repeatedly.

⁷³ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926), 74.

⁷⁴ Cash, "Character Education in the USMC," 1–2.

One example using the life experience of Stockdale involves his time at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, where he spent seven years and endured multiple rounds of torture. Stockdale relates a story regarding a fellow prisoner, who, after release, died under suspicious circumstances that strongly suggested suicide.⁷⁵ Of the prisoner, Stockdale writes, “He was obsessed with success . . . a classic opportunist. He befriended and worked for the enemy to the detriment of his fellow Americans. In time, out of fear and shame, he withdrew; we could not get him to communicate with the American prisoner organization.”⁷⁶ The man survived the ordeal and was released with the others. However, only months after his release, he was killed in an accident that strongly resembled suicide. Stockdale’s remarks are instructive:

He was right out of Aristotle’s book, a good man with a flaw who had come to an unjustified bad end. The flaw was insecurity: the need to ingratiate himself, the need for love and adulation at any price. He reminded me of Paul Newman in *The Hustler* . . . he knew how to make a deal. He was handsome, he was smart, he was attractive to everybody; but he had to have adulation, and therein lay the seed of tragedy—he’s all skill and no character.⁷⁷

Stockdale survived the ordeal to earn the Medal of Honor and attain vice admiral rank, but his most enduring contribution was insisting that all leaders study ethics *lest they become casualties of character*. As his story underscores, character is critical to all members of the military, whether in combat or not.

MCMAP must therefore function as a vital platform for developing a Marine’s character, going far beyond its role as a sparring ground to teach Marines combat skills. It has a vital role in a Marine’s transition from civilian to an ethical warfighter, a process that continues long after recruit training. As stated in *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCTP 6-10A:

Once Marines earn the right to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor, each one must continue the transition process, each growing in character and abilities as they strive to become more than just someone who meets the requirements to be a Marine, but to be the Marine needed for the future mission.

⁷⁵ As quoted by RAdm Carey H. Cash, CHC, USN, “Recovering the Classical Tradition: The Chaplain’s Role as Ethics Educator in the New Moral Battlespace” (paper presented at the National Defense University conference “1918-2018: Lessons from the Great War—Ethical Imperatives for the Contemporary Profession of Arms,” Washington, DC, 30 July 2018), 2, argues that military ethics programs suffer “institutional paralysis” and advocates Aristotelian virtue ethics to preempt moral failures.

⁷⁶ Cash, “Recovering the Classical Tradition,” 2.

⁷⁷ Cash, “Recovering the Classical Tradition.”

This transformation must be intentional and continuous to ensure the Marine Corps remains a force in readiness.⁷⁸

Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, MCRP 3-02B, articulates how character factors into the mythos of the Marine Corps, stating that “this legacy includes not only our fighting prowess but also the character and soul of what makes us unique as Marines. During these early years, the leadership and core values training that are our hallmark today developed in concert with the martial skills.”⁷⁹ Accordingly, the focus on character is best understood in the context of other Marine Corps publications and orders, which demonstrate the Corps’ commitment to developing morally and ethically sound Marines, rather than skilled killers proficient in the application of violence. This understanding and expectation are supported in *Learning*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 7, in which the importance of character is linked to intellect:

A Marine’s mindset, values, ethics, and experiences impact his or her learning, decisions, and actions. Character, will, and intellect, they’re interrelated, and they’re inextricably linked. Now character is about moral character, and it’s . . . about the capacity and the sense of the rightness of your decision: to be able to make that decision quickly. The will is about having the strength to execute the decision, and the intellect undergirds it all by giving you the context, the intellectual context, to be able to make the decision.⁸⁰

In *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, the combination of one’s character and skill within their military occupational specialty (MOS) builds the glue of unit cohesion: trust. To this end, the document notes that “leaders of high moral character and professional competence who are not just technically and tactically proficient but who earn and breed trust among subordinates. These leaders in turn form the foundation of effective warfighting units characterized by mutual understanding, implicit communication, and esprit de corps.”⁸¹ MCMAP transcends mere hand-to-hand combat training. It forges unit cohesion, moral strength, and the will to fight. *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program* states as much, saying, “The true value of Marine Corps Martial Arts Program is enhancement to unit training. A fully implemented program can

⁷⁸ *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCTP 6-10A (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024), 1-5.

⁷⁹ *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, 1-1.

⁸⁰ *Learning*, MCDP 7 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020), 1-10.

⁸¹ *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, 2.

help instill unit esprit de corps and help foster the mental, character, and physical development of the individual Marine in the unit.”⁸² It is time for MCMAP to fulfill its original intent in Marine character development efforts. Failing to fully leverage this program is a missed opportunity for the Marine Corps.

Marine Corps doctrine articulated above establishes character development as central to the profession of arms. *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program* grounds it in institutional mythos, *Learning*, MCDP 7, links it to decision-making under pressure, and *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* connects it to unit trust and cohesion. MCMAP was designed as the institutional mechanism to operationalize this doctrine, forging ethical warriors whose character produces the will to fight. Yet, the program’s drift toward belt progression represents more than a missed training opportunity. Under Force Design distributed operations, where Stockdale’s individual character failure in a prisoner of war camp becomes the strategic corporal’s ethical collapse in the field, character transcends unit cohesion to become a combat multiplier. What happens when that strategic corporal operates beyond command oversight, armed with MCMAP’s lethal techniques but lacking its ethical foundation?

Character as a Combat Multiplier for EABO and Distributed Maritime Operations

Force Design’s distributed operations transform character from desirable trait to mission-critical requirement: the strategic corporal operating beyond oversight, armed with MCMAP’s lethal techniques, represents either decisive advantage or catastrophic liability depending on ethical formation. Those serving as stand-in forces (SIF) supporting EABO sea-denial concepts that create antiaccess/area-denial of defense (A2/D2) “envelopes” to control maritime terrain, will have a high level of autonomy and be responsible for positively interacting with host nation militaries and civilians.⁸³ The warrior ethos, defined by traits of discipline and selfless sacrifice, must be deliberately cultivated to remain operative in modern operating environments where the tactical actions of junior Ma-

⁸² *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, foreword.

⁸³ Maj Pat Hassett, USMC, “Bringing Clarity to Stand-in Forces: How Operational Art and Science Provide the Linkage between Stand-in Forces, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, and Reconnaissance/Counter-reconnaissance Operations” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 79–100, <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.20241502005>, clarifies the “amorphous” linkage between SIF, EABO, and reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance operations (RXR) by positioning SIF as the overarching operational concept; Jim Lacey, “The ‘Dumbest Concept Ever’ Just Might Win Wars,” *War on the Rocks*, 29 July 2019, argues that EABO is a sea-denial concept designed to deter a peer adversary by creating land-based antiaccess envelopes; and *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, 2–12, notes that stand-in forces require high autonomy and must maintain positive relations with host-nation forces and civilians to enable effective sea-denial within contested maritime terrain.

rines can have strategic implications.⁸⁴ Thus, while the Marine Corps' operating concept has evolved during the last decade, the focus on a Marine's character having an outsized impact is not new. General Charles C. Krulak's concept of the Three Block War emphasized that when conducting humanitarian, peace-keeping/stabilization, and combat operations simultaneously, the actions of a Marine corporal can have a strategic impact.⁸⁵ Krulak identified three priorities for developing strategic corporals: instilling Marine Corps ethos to address battlefield "moral quandaries," providing professional military education for technical proficiency, and modeling quality leadership to inspire Marines to similar excellence.⁸⁶ The Three Block War and the current distributed operations concepts highlight the necessity of leadership and character at all levels. In the modern distributed maritime operations (DMO) and EABO frameworks, Marines will disperse across a wide geographical area, far away from the watchful eyes of senior leaders at the "flagpole." This situation will require junior Marines to make character-based decisions that greatly influence the care of their fellow Marines, relationships with Joint and partner forces, and the execution of offensive and defensive operations.

The Marine Corps must seize every opportunity to develop Marines' character, which is a lifelong endeavor, not a guaranteed byproduct of recruit training. Failure carries strategic consequences: poor judgment by Marines lacking character development produces costly operational and tactical setbacks. General Krulak directly equated character with military readiness, stating,

The Corps is a ready force, not a force that when called on must struggle to get ready. Our challenge is to be a Corps of men and women who consistently represent the highest moral character in and out of uniform. Character creates a foundation on which successful military units are built. From this foundation, Honor, Courage, and Commitment will always be evident, providing the perfect description of a United States Marine.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Speigle, "The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos," 1, contends that the warrior ethos must be intentionally developed through leadership and education to stay effective amid strategic-level junior actions.

⁸⁵ Franklin C. Annis, "Krulak Revisited: The Three-Block War, Strategic Corporals, and the Future Battlefield," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 3 February 2020, argues that Krulak's positive "strategic corporal" philosophy became "distorted" into a "toxic" misinterpretation focused on negative strategic impacts of tactical failure.

⁸⁶ Annis, "Krulak Revisited."

⁸⁷ *ALMAR 248/96, Character* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 9 July 1996), equates character with readiness, defining it as the foundation of military units and shield against despair developed daily through right habits.

To this end, Krulak states:

Character is developed everyday in garrison, on deployment, aboard ship, on duty or on liberty, wherever we are around the world. We are not born with character. It is developed by the experiences and decisions that guide our lives. Neither can we borrow the character or reputation of another. Each individual creates, develops and nurtures their own. That is why each one of us must learn to make good moral decisions in our lives. When the right course of action is unclear, only the habit of doing the right thing, as practiced everyday in all areas of our lives, can be counted upon. Well-developed character is our shield against fear and despair. That's why Napoleon said that in war, the importance of the moral, relative to the physical, is three to one.⁸⁸

Examples from military history reinforce General Krulak's belief that character can have dire military implications with strategic consequences. The My Lai massacre, which involved the killing of women, children, and elderly villagers in Vietnam, severely damaged America's trust in its soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War and contributed to the growing antiwar sentiment in the United States.⁸⁹ In 1995, two Marines and a sailor raped a 12-year-old Okinawan girl. Regarding the implications of that event, Krulak said, "When [they] raped a little girl in Okinawa, that had massive strategic importance," he says. "We've never gotten over it."⁹⁰

During the Global War on Terrorism, incidents of detainee abuse severely undermined the entire counterinsurgency mission in Iraq by validating enemy propaganda and alienating populations the United States needed to win over. The horrific treatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison, for example, was not an isolated event but resulted from a systemic U.S. policy to circumvent

⁸⁸ *ALMAR 248/96, Character.*

⁸⁹ See, for example, Fred L. Borch, "A Look at the My Lai Incident Fifty Years Later," *On Point* 23, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 41; Kent A. Russell, "My Lai Massacre: The Need for an International Investigation," *California Law Review* 58, no. 3 (May 1970): 703, 708, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3479613>, analyzes the leadership failures and cover-up of My Lai, noting the event's shock to the public and its role in spurring Army ethics and values reforms; and Mark D. Carson, "F. Edward Hébert and the Congressional Investigation of the My Lai Massacre," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 61–79, argues that Hébert's ideological bias and deference to military policy limited the My Lai inquiry's depth and findings.

⁹⁰ Tobias Naegele, "Want to Understand the Future of War? Talk to Chuck Krulak," *Defense One*, 3 February 2018, notes the 1995 Okinawa rape incident triggered mass protests, operational halt, Status of Forces Agreement revision calls, and lasting antibase sentiment.

international law.⁹¹ Moreover, the killing of 15 innocent civilians during an incident at Haditha also damaged American credibility in Iraq and enraged the local population Marines were supposed to protect.⁹²

Additionally, the “Fat Leonard” Navy scandal called the integrity of military personnel into question, challenging whether members could be trusted to carry out their mission with honor when officers, including an active-duty admiral, were willing to redirect military vessels in exchange for cash and luxury gifts.⁹³ In 2024, an airman stationed in Okinawa was charged with raping a minor, and the episode triggered an immediate resurgence of local opposition to the U.S. military presence on an island widely regarded by the Pentagon as critical to regional deterrence against China.⁹⁴ As in the 1995 rape incident, the resulting public outcry underscored the persistent civil–military tensions surrounding the U.S. presence in Okinawa and its strategic necessity.⁹⁵ These cases illustrate lapses in character that proved highly detrimental to military efforts, undermined public trust, and eroded the collective will to fight. Indeed, they demonstrate that the individual character of servicemembers will play a decisive role in future battles as the Marine Corps pivots to the Pacific and conducts EABO and DMO.

Conclusion

MCMAP’s drift from character development to belt progression has eroded the Corps’ capacity to forge the ethical warriors that Force Design demands. As the program marks its 25th anniversary, the evidence is unambiguous: when the Corps separates combatives training from ethical formation, it produces measurable harm to combat effectiveness and moral function. Force Design’s distributed operations demand character-centered training and they depend on it entirely. MCMAP represents the Marine Corps’ systematic answer: an institutional program that fuses combat skills with ethical formation. Yet, institutional drift threatens that design, precisely when dispersed operations make it essen-

⁹¹ Reed Brody, *The Road to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004), 1, argues that Abu Ghraib stemmed from systemic policy circumventing international law, including torture memoranda and imported interrogation methods.

⁹² Tom Engelhardt, “Collateral Damage and the ‘Incident’ at Haditha,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1015>, argues that Abu Ghraib stemmed not from isolated acts but a systemic U.S. policy to circumvent international law.

⁹³ Associated Press, “‘Fat Leonard,’ Navy Scandal Mastermind, Sentenced to 15 Years,” *Navy Times*, 5 November 2024, reports on Leonard Francis’s 15-year sentence for a \$35 million bribery scheme where Navy officers traded classified information and ship movements for gifts.

⁹⁴ Joel Guinto, “US Soldier Charged in Japan for Rape of Minor,” *BBC News*, 26 June 2024.

⁹⁵ “Restoring Trust and Preserving the U.S.-Japan Alliance: The 1995 Okinawa Rape Incident,” Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 28 July 2021, summarizes the 1995 rape incident, diplomatic response, and its implications for U.S.–Japan relations.

tial for warriors whose character sustains success under isolation and stress. To ensure character is reinforced at the unit level, commanding officers and senior leaders should view MCMAP as their character laboratory. MCMAP is an excellent vehicle to pass “sea stories,” character lessons, and leverage guest speakers such as chaplains to reinforce ethical expectations and moral decision making.⁹⁶ From an institutional perspective, the Marine Corps should commission a comprehensive study to determine where MCMAP can best be changed to integrate the physical requirements with character development.⁹⁷

The first section of this article demonstrates that spiritual fitness is not a peripheral wellness program but operational armor and deliberately cultivated spiritual foundations provide documented protection against moral injury and PTSD while strengthening combat resilience. Four successive Commandants designed MCMAP as an integrated system where physical, mental, and character discipline reinforce one another, not as separable components, but as unified warrior formation. Section two revealed the consequences of abandoning this design. When MCMAP implementation prioritizes belt progression over character development, harm follows: combatives-only training produces measurable declines in moral function. Historical examples from My Lai to Abu Ghraib illustrate the strategic consequences when character fails.

These findings return to the fundamental principle: the will to fight wins wars. In an era when adversaries can acquire technology but struggle to build cohesive fighting forces, character becomes the decisive advantage. Nations can purchase hardware. They cannot purchase the will to fight. Recent conflicts reaffirm this truth: Ukrainian forces show how a superior will to fight can stall or even defeat a larger invading military while imposing heavy costs on the enemy. Meanwhile, Afghan National Security Forces collapsed in 2021 despite two decades of American training and billions in advanced equipment. MCMAP’s founding Commandants understood what these conflicts now confirm: wars are won by character, not hardware alone. The Corps built MCMAP to develop that decisive advantage. Distributed operations make it even more mission-critical. The Marine Corps must reclaim MCMAP as its doctrine demands.

⁹⁶ For ideas to help create guided discussions, see Daigle, Goff, and Reardon, “Entering the Temple of Mars,” appendix and scenarios 1–4.

⁹⁷ Authors’ note: any revisions to *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, should be accompanied by significant data from a comprehensive study such as studies by Rand or Center for Naval Analyses necessitating a change.