

Developing the Ethical Marine Warrior

What exactly are we talking about?

by Jack E. Hoban

The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) is often described as having three synergistic aspects—physical, mental, and moral. The Director, retired Marine LtCol Joseph C. Shusko, remains adamant, however, that the primary end state of the training is an ethical Marine warrior.

This article has been written to explore the concept of an ethical warrior and to discuss how we clarify, activate, and sustain the ethic at the Martial Arts Center of Excellence (MACE). Clarify means: what *is* the warrior ethic? Activate means: how do I get the feeling of it deep in my conscience, deep in my “gut”? Sustain means: once I get the feeling, how do I keep it from “wearing off,” especially under the stress of combat but also in garrison, on liberty, at home, and after I finally hang up my uniform? The intent is to provide Marines throughout the Corps with encouragement and ideas as they hone their MCMAP skills and strive to live the warrior ethic.

What Is the Ethical Warrior?

The term “ethical warrior” seems to have struck a chord with people who believe that a Marine represents the epitome of honor, courage, and com-

mitment on and off the battlefield. There is no “official definition” of an ethical warrior, but after years of discussion and refinement, the most satisfying description we can offer is that the ethical warrior is a “protector” of life. Whose life? Self and others. Which others? All others.

The Physical-Moral Synergy

It should be noted that the primary purpose of MCMAP is *not* to teach philosophy per se. On the contrary, we have learned that when it comes to ethics, Marines respond best to the tie-ins (stories with a strong emotional impact that inspire moral behavior) rather than to a lecture on philosophy.

One of the most important, yet unheralded, phenomena of MCMAP is that we see that moral lessons are best delivered in context of the physical training. It works like magic, as many Marine leaders who have felt the bonding feeling of shared adversity can tell you. In other words, to develop ethical warriors, realistic physical training and the values tie-ins work best in combination rather than separately—and much better than a purely intellectual approach. The take away here is that the physical-moral approach works, and a full philosophy curriculum is not required. Yet, as the Greeks said, “All actions derive from philosophy.” In that regard, it must be said that the warrior ethic is based upon a clear philosophy of values. The bedrock of that set of values is one universal value.

1. The Ethical Warrior is best described as a “protector and defender” of Life – Whose life? Self and others. Which others? All others.
2. When teaching Warrior Ethics, young Marines respond best to a physical-moral approach like MCMAP (rather than the “in the classroom,” intellectual approach).
3. We can “harden” our philosophy by articulating that the “Life Value” is the bedrock premise underlying our Core Values.
4. America has a reputation for being the moral leaders of the world. That image can be polished by reasserting our core American values of respect for Life and Human Equality.

The four points.

The Universal Value

That concept of a universal value is the subject of a favorite MCMAP tie-in. It is a story from the book, *Values for a New Millennium*,¹ by one our mentors, the late Robert Humphrey, who was a rifle platoon commander on Iwo Jima. We call it “The Hunting Story.”

After World War II America was the undisputed leader of the world. For a

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while everyone loved us, even our former enemies. But soon people began to resent us due to what was perceived as our superior attitude.

We Americans thought that the dislike that many people felt for us was unjustified and ungrateful. After all, we had defeated fascism in World War II and were rebuilding many parts of the world out of our own generosity. Still, resentment for Americans overseas was real—and growing.

In one particular country in Asia Minor, the unrest was beginning to have strategic implications during that delicate time of détente. The trouble centered on the presence of an American missile base there. The local people said that they wanted the base closed and the Americans to go home. Humphrey's job was to find a solution to the conflict.

The basic problem was plain old culture shock. The Americans working in that poor ally country thought that the local people were 'dumb, dirty, dishonest, lazy, unsanitary, immoral, violent, cruel, crazy, and downright subhuman,' and what's more, they let them know it. No matter what he did, Humphrey couldn't stop the negative talk—partially because some of it seemed true!

One day, as a diversion, Humphrey decided to go hunting for wild boar with some people from the American embassy. They took a truck from the motor pool and headed out to the boondocks, stopping at a village to hire some local men to beat the brush and act as guides.

This village was very poor. The huts were made of mud and there was no electricity or running water. The streets were unpaved dirt and the whole village smelled. Flies abounded. The men looked surly and wore dirty clothes. The women covered their faces, and the children had runny noses and were dressed in rags.

It wasn't long before one American in the truck said, 'This place stinks.' Another said, 'These people live just like animals.' Finally, a young air force man said, 'Yeah, they got nothin' to live for; they may as well be dead.'

What could you say? It seemed true enough.

But just then, an old sergeant in the truck spoke up. He was the quiet type who never said much. In fact, except for his uniform, he kind of reminded you of one of the tough men in the village. He looked at the young airman and said, 'You think they got nothin' to live for, do you? Well, if you are so sure, why don't you just take my knife, jump down off the back of this truck, and go try to kill one of them?' There was dead silence in the truck.

Humphrey was amazed. It was the first time that anyone had said anything that had actually silenced the negative talk about the local people. The sergeant went on to say, 'I don't know either why they value their lives so much. Maybe it's those snotty nosed kids, or the women in the pantaloons. But whatever it is, they care about their lives and the lives of their loved ones, same as we Americans do. And if we don't stop talking bad about them, they will kick us out of this country!'

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Humphrey asked him what we Americans, with all our wealth, could do to prove our respect for the peasants' human equality despite their destitution. The sergeant answered easily, 'You got to be brave enough to jump off the back of this truck, knee deep in the mud and sheep dung. You got to have the courage to walk through this village with a smile on your face. And when you see the smelliest, scariest looking peasant, you got to be able to look him in the face and let him know, just with your eyes, that you know he is a man who hurts like you do, and hopes like you do, and wants for his kids just like we all do. It is that way or we lose.'

This story emotionally affects most of us Americans. We sympathize with

those poor villagers. Perhaps it is because we are natural underdog lovers. Remember, a cause of our own Revolutionary War against the British was that they looked down on us. Recall this popular motto from that time: "Don't tread on me." It was on one of our flags.

But the point of the story, according to Humphrey, is that beneath our culture, beneath the fine clothes or the dirty rags, beneath the color of our skin, we all love life, we all hurt sometimes, and we all want for our children. The people in that village weren't speaking out, but in their hearts each of them was saying, "Don't look down on me. You are my equal. My life and the lives of my loved ones are as important to me as yours are to you." This value—Humphrey called it the "life value" in his work—appears to be a universal value. Everyone wants their lives to be respected. We believe that this is the value that Jefferson was talking about as the "inalienable right" to life in our enabling document, the Declaration of Independence.

But there is more. Did you notice the exact words the old sergeant used in the story? He said, "I don't know either why they value their lives so much. Maybe it's those snotty nosed kids, or the women in the pantaloons." That is an important clue to further understanding of the life value. When we talk about the life value, whose life are we exactly talking about?

Life: A Dual Value

One often hears the statement "self preservation is the first law of nature." Is that really true? Here is a surprising Humphrey story from the battle of Iwo Jima that sheds light on this question. As you read ask yourself, if you were the young platoon leader, would you think that life was a selfish value?

'The Iwo Jima Story'²

On the sixth day of the battle for Iwo Jima, I took command of the only six (teenage) American Marines who were still left in a front-line rifle platoon that had more than 40 original mem-

bers [Company F, 2d Battalion, 28th Marines].

I took over my platoon in a protected area. Men were walking around. They were an experienced, confident group who had been involved in the fighting at the top of Mount Suribachi.

One young man was especially noticeable, carrying an unusual Thompson submachine gun. He oozed self-confidence and independence. After chow that first evening, as he perfected his foxhole, he started declaring to himself in a loud voice: 'I don't volunteer for nothin' else! Screw the Marine Corps! Screw Mount Suribachi! Screw everything except ol' number one! That's all that counts: gettin' off this island alive! I don't volunteer for nothin'!

He shouted it so repeatedly that a couple of the other men picked it up. 'Yeah! Right! We don't volunteer for nothing!' Suddenly it dawned on me that they were obliquely speaking to

me, their new platoon leader. I felt the chill of having my leadership threatened.

The next morning, as we prepared to edge out of our positions, a message came down from higher headquarters. As luck would have it, I was being ordered to send a volunteer out onto a hill in front of us on a sure-death reconnaissance mission. Hesitant to ask for volunteers after what I had heard the night before, I announced that I, myself, would go. I made the excuse that, since I was new, I wanted to see the terrain. No sooner had I spoken, than the same Marine who had made the declarations the previous night said, 'No, I'll go, Lieutenant.'

'What?' I exclaimed, 'You were the one last night saying that you never volunteer for anything!'

Almost sheepishly trying to cover his willingness to take my place, he answered, 'Well, I just can't trust any of you other jarheads on such a mission.'

Stunned, I realized that this Marine was saying, 'My turn to die, Lieutenant—not yours.'

A Primer on Values, Morals, and Ethics

We use these stories (tie-ins) to inspire and activate moral behavior. "The Hunting Story" teaches the universal life value and human equality. "The Iwo Jima Story" teaches that the life value is a dual value—self and others—and that the best of us understand how to keep that balance.

At this point we will do what we do not do explicitly in the MCMAP training and tie-ins. We will clarify our understanding of the underlying philosophy beneath the warrior ethic. We start with values.

Values. According to the dictionary, values are "things that have an intrinsic worth in usefulness or importance to the possessor," or "principles, stan-



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dards, or qualities considered worthwhile or desirable.” However, it is important to note that, although we may tend to think of a value as something good, virtually all values are morally relative—neutral, really—until they are qualified by asking, “How is it good?” or “Good to whom?” The “good” can sometimes be just a matter of opinion or taste, or driven by culture, religion, habit, circumstance, or environment, etc. Again, almost all values are relative. The exception, of course, is the life value. We all have that value, or we would not be alive.

Moral values. Moral values are relative values that protect life and support the dual life value of self and others. The great moral values, such as truth, freedom, charity, etc., have one thing in common. When they are functioning correctly, they are life protecting or life enhancing for all. But they are still relative values. Our relative moral values must be constantly examined to make sure that they are always performing their life-protecting mission. Even the Marine Corps core values require examination in this context. Courage can become foolish martyrdom, commitment can become irrational fanaticism, honor can become self-righteousness, conceit, and disrespect for others. Our enemies have their own standard of honor, they have courage, and they are surely committed. What sets us apart? Respect for the life value sets us apart from our enemies. When you kill protecting life it is still hard, but it is moral. Those who will kill anyone not observant of their narrow relative religious, ethnic, or criminal values—in other words, kill over relative values—are immoral. Our dedication to protecting the life value of self and others—all others—makes us different and moral.

Life is the “true north” of the moral compass. When we possess a calibrated compass and are clear as to why our actions are moral, we can more reliably navigate toward the ethical and away from actions that may be immoral and regrettable. Without trying to gloss

over the very real fact that Marines do kill people, we can articulate clearly that Marines “kill to protect life.” The life value is the guiding bedrock principle that inspires us to be “honorable, courageous, and committed.”

Ethics. A person who knows the difference between right and wrong and chooses right is moral. A person whose morality is reflected in his willingness to do the right thing—even if it is hard or dangerous—is ethical.

Ethics are moral values in action. It starts in the schoolyard. Most everybody knows that the bully is wrong. That’s morality. But only a few will speak up to protect the one getting bullied by calling for a teacher. That’s ethical behavior. Even fewer will step in physically to actually protect the child being bullied. That’s the behavior of an ethical warrior.

It is important that we articulate why Marines must be ethical (must act

morally). We have to be ethical because morality protects life. It is a lifestyle that is consistent with mankind’s universal value as articulated by our Founding Fathers—the life value. As Marines it is our duty to be protectors and defenders of that value and to perform the unique and difficult mission of taking the lives of those acting immorally (against life) as we protect the lives of innocent others.

Why Martial Arts?

Ethics are ultimately moral-physical. Moral people may want to step up and do the right thing, but they often lack the physical courage and ability. Martial arts give them the necessary skills and confidence. And that is why ethical warrior training includes—and must include—martial arts, especially for Marines.

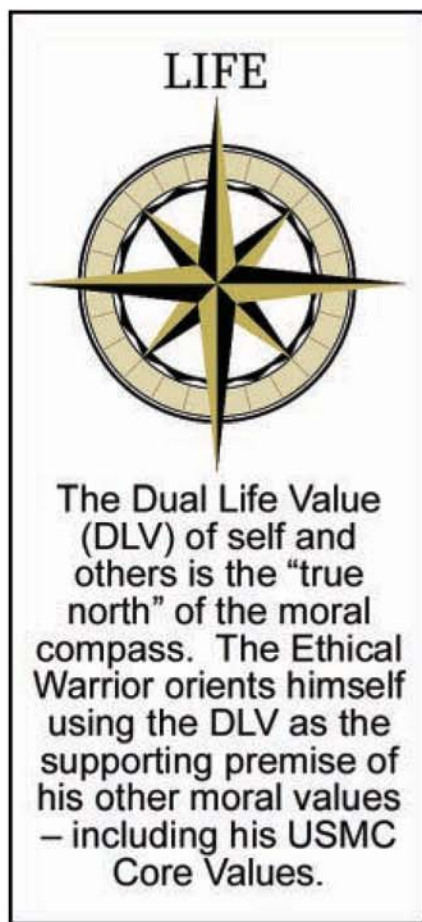
The second aspect of MCMAP, the proper mindset—a combat mindset—is also important. Focused on our role of protectors, it allows us to overcome fear, hate, and other affective behaviors that would keep us from being the professional warriors that we are.

Finally, it is vital that the martial arts training be ongoing. An interesting challenge with ethical warriorship is that the clarification and activation parts tend to “wear off” without sustainment. We sustain our warrior ethic by continuous training. That means at least a few hours a week of the physical MCMAP training with the moral tie-ins.

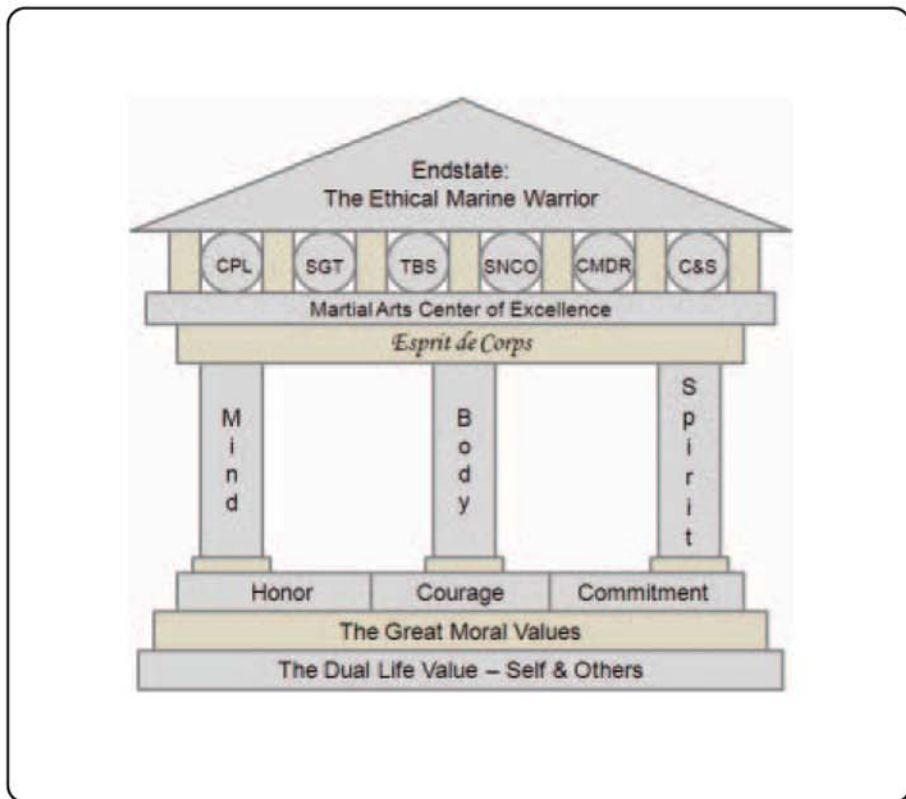
It is true that the difference between right and wrong, morality and immorality, is not often a matter of life and death. Sometimes it is just a matter of getting a reasonable balance of concern between self and others in order to live a good life. Getting that good balance between self and others—and maintaining it through sustainment—is the art of living.

In Summary

At the MACE we strive to develop ethical warriors through a combination of physical protection techniques, values tie-ins, and good old-fashioned “set the example” leadership. Our “de-



The moral compass.



The ethical warrior parthenon.

livery mechanism” is the MCMAP training because this physical-moral formula works better than a purely intellectual approach. Yet there is a clear philosophy underlying the method. The concept of an ethical warrior is built upon the bedrock premise of the life value of self and others—all others—as stated in the Declaration of Independence. The life value is the guiding principle that inspires us to be “honorable, courageous, and committed.” The Marine Corps core values are moral values because they apply consistently—to both friend and foe. They apply even if the cultural or behavioral values of the people we encounter don’t always seem worthy of our high standards.

It is true that every choice we make, every situation we experience, is not necessarily a matter of life or death. The challenges and temptations of normal, everyday life can test our morality mightily—even when no one will die based upon what we do. Yet, as protectors and defenders of life, we have a philosophical perspective—a moral

compass—that can guide us in every action and decision as we seek to maintain a healthy, balanced concern between self and others.

We want Marines to be shining examples of our Nation’s best values. Externally, America has a reputation for being the moral leaders of the world. That image can be polished—not with money and/or arms only—but with a clearer demonstration of our moral values. This may not sell to the hardcore fanatics. They may still have to be captured or killed, but it will sell to everybody else. The result will be greater respect and security for our Nation.

Notes

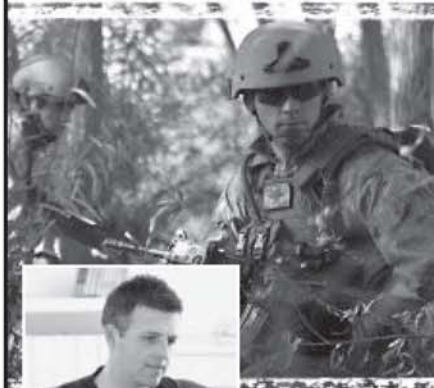
1. Humphrey, Robert L., *Values for a New Millennium*, Life Values Press, Maynardville, TN, 1992, pp. 48–51.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 145–146.



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