

Spiritual Fitness

An unseen element of fitness

by Maj Andrew P. Kettner

Three months into a MEU deployment and so many personnel of the landing force and ship's company work through tremendous heat, sweat, and pain to prepare themselves for promotion and advancement, improve their fitness, and achieve a higher Marine Corps martial arts belt. I see it on their faces: the determination of our citizens aboard all three ships to excel and finish this deployment more proficient than when they arrived. However, there remains an element of silence, a topic not discussed with the same vigor as burpees conducted on the flight decks or sprints through the well decks and is far too uncommon throughout the Marine Corps: spiritual fitness.

Seized by an unquenchable appetite and need for quantitative proof of success, other elements of the whole Marine concept receive definitive support through application of funds, personnel promotion policies, and combat readiness evaluations, while spiritual fitness falls to a distance second or third behind the others. After all, if an end state cannot be measured, should it even be invested in? The 37th Commandant highlighted this deficiency with the publication of the *ALMAR 033/16/Subject/Spiritual Fitness*, but much of our day to day training continued unabated and unchanged.¹ If the Marine Corps intends to demonstrate resolve and actionable solutions to the United States Congress' accurate critics, we must have courage and develop a system to better train our most personal and unseen element of fitness.

Convincing a Marine to put forth effort toward physical fitness events is easy when compared against the deeply personal, often long-term, unmeasurable individual successes of spiritual

>Maj Kettner is the Executive Officer for Combat Logistics Battalion 11. He is a Logistics Officer and Expeditionary Logistics Instructor. Maj Kettner wrote this article while deployed with 11th MEU and embarked on USS Harpers Ferry (LSD-49) in support of western pacific deployment 19.2.



Religious ministry teams have a vital role to play in the growth of spiritual fitness of our Marines. (Photo by Sgt Bethanie Sahms.)

fitness. The difficulties are only compounded when a corporal or sergeant is expected to develop the skill set needed to energize and gain buy-in, see weaknesses, and then intrusively counsel their subordinates on topics of much greater magnitude and importance than their financial worksheet or number of Marine Net courses completed. The Marine Corps is quickly developing the Force Fitness Instructor program, a portion of the larger force fitness update which began in 2018 and whose mission is to

[provide] a comprehensive approach to total fitness, while integrating the

Marine Corps martial arts, water survival, general and occupational fitness, nutrition, and Sports Medicine and Injury Prevention (SMIP) programs in order to improve the overall health, physical fitness, and combat readiness of individual Marines and units.²

The Force Fitness Program has the history akin to a small child when compared to the spiritual “force fitness instructors” currently staffed in Marine Corps commands, also known as religious ministry teams (RMTs). These chaplains and religious program specialists have served alongside Marines since 28 November 1775 and 15

January 1979, respectively, and often take on the preponderance of the spiritual training for each command, small unit, and individual personal development. However, the RMT is due for an update. The current implementation of the Force Fitness Instructor serves as road map to update the RMT concept into a Marine Corps owned and oriented program.

Fighting in five domains require Marines and Sailors to operate at a smaller and more dispersed environment without the daily aide of assigned RMTs. Chaplain recruitment into the Navy challenges supporting our various commands table of organizations, ultimately requiring prioritization of personnel assignment and an acceptance that certain commands will not have a chaplain. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps must work through the ravaging effects on commands—and more importantly individuals—regarding sexual assault, human trafficking, and hazing. These actions, more so than low physical fitness tests and rifle scores, undermine the credibility in the eyes of both the taxpayer and Congress while also reducing combat power for combatant commanders. The most effective and only treatment for these character flaws is more effective spiritual fitness training, which requires institutional change.

Change of any level takes time, often much longer than expected, and positive change to a damaged or broken spirit can take the longest of any of the elements of the whole Marine Concept. Implemented over the next four years, elements of spiritual fitness training and individual growth will support effective change. The first proposal is to change the name of RMTs to spiritual fitness teams. Spiritual fitness is more than just religious understanding, and the definition and title of the team should reflect this. At a minimum, a SNCO or above will serve as a spiritual fitness trainer, educated through a new course and certification developed by Training and Education Command, with a focus on interpersonal counseling, personal growth, goal setting, and stress coping skills. The spiritual fitness trainer becomes the equivalent of a Marine Corps force fitness instruc-

tor and supervises the execution of the command's small unit leader counseling and mentorship program—not in conflict with the confidential counseling employed by the Chaplain Corps, Operational Stress Control and Readiness training, suicide prevention, force preservation program, Marine Corps

ing session in Marine Corps combat utility uniform led by their platoon commander and enlisted leadership. If these bold recommendations are implemented, a third spiritual fitness event will take place alongside or in place of these physical fitness activities, where squad leaders discuss a training and

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Community Service utilization, as well as other required programs. Many of the aforementioned programs are redundant with conflicting or confusing reporting and accountability requirements. This new spiritual fitness trainer Marine will serve within the new SFTs to influence and train personnel within the command. Next, an additional eight hours, or more if deemed necessary, of instruction is provided at each enlisted PME school and career- and command-level education courses to provide our leaders with the tools needed to, “Steel your spirit ... so that you will be ready for the decisive moment in combat,”³ whether the enemy is a foreign target or our Marines’ and Sailors’ own spiritual shortcomings. Finally, Marine corporals and below who earned the Good Conduct Medal will receive an additional 100 points on their composite score in order to further incentivize the attainment of the award as well as to reinforce publicly the importance the Marine Corps has on disciplined service. These recommendations are phase one of what should be an in-depth review of how the Marine Corps initiates and “sustain the transformation,” which requires detailed study and analysis outside the parameters of this article.

On 2 August 2019, aboard USS *Harpers Ferry* (LSD-49), 30 Marines and Sailors graduated from a Marine Corps Martial Arts Instructor Trainer Course. On 3 August 2019, a platoon completed a one-hour physical train-

readiness associated standards with a performance evaluation checklist, evaluated by the spiritual fitness team, and updated in Marine Corps Training Management System. In this future, the Marine Corps has reduced the number of suicides as well as crimes of power and control (i.e., sexual assault and hazing), and is full of Marines of the strongest spiritual fitness scores.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness*, (Washington, DC: October 2016).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 6100.14, Marine Corps Physical Fitness Program*, (Washington, DC: December 2018).
3. Gen Robert B. Neller, “Seize the Initiative,” (Washington, DC: HQMC, February 2017).

>Editor’s Note: Readers’ attention is directed to ALMAR 226/20, Renaming of Force Fitness Division as the Human Performance Division, for more information.

