

2022 Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Writing Contest: First Place

Warrior Philosophy

The case for stoic leadership

by Maj Dilan Swift

"A gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a man perfected without trials."

—Seneca

On 9 September 1965, the commander of Carrier Air Group 16 flew what would be his last mission over North Vietnam. After striking his target, North Vietnamese anti-aircraft artillery engaged his A-4 Skyhawk. Within seconds, engines failed, power was lost, and the pilot ejected over North Vietnam, certain of a grim fate—suffering. Most Marine officers know where this story goes, but many more junior Marines and sailors are unfamiliar. Then-Navy CAPT James Stockdale's epic journey as a warrior-philosopher who survived seven brutal years as a prisoner of war is a foundational tale in officer training and education. Stockdale's epic is used to introduce officers to the importance of philosophical education as the foundation for effective leadership and resilience.

For over 200 years, the Corps has forged leaders. From Marine Corps Recruit Depot to Officer Candidate School, and the Crucible to the Quigley, the Corps has perfected the science of unleashing leadership potential. Enlisted and commissioned officers are taught to embrace uncertainty, operate with minimal guidance, and embody time-tested leadership traits and principles

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ADM James Stockdale. The modern warrior-philosopher. (Photo: U.S. Navy)

that allow them to lead in chaos. While these tools are appropriate for preparing leaders for war, they are insufficient in preparing leaders to face a new and growing crisis in peace.

The Nation's youth are suffering, and so too are Marines. Existing leadership models are not enough to prepare leaders to mentor and coach the force through the growing rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and addiction that are now pervasive in American society. These struggles are especially acute in

the generation of young Marines currently joining our ranks. While the Corps is not intended to rectify society's ills, Gen Krulak did charge the Corps with returning the country's youth better for their service.¹ To counter these ills and build a more resilient and effective Corps, leaders should look to time-tested philosophical approaches to address this new crisis. Fortunately, a tried-and-true warrior philosophy has existed for two millennia that can aid leaders in navigating these turbulent times. Stoicism, a philosophy developed by the ancient Greeks and Romans, provides a universal grounding philosophy upon which the Marine Corps' ethos of Honor, Courage, and Commitment can firmly stand.

"It does not matter what you bear, but how you bear it."

—Seneca

The Crisis

Each month, more Marines join the long list of American warfighters lost to their own hand. Such self-inflicted casualties have become an unfortunate norm in the Corps and society at large. Through training, leaders may be able to identify indicators of suffering, but they are largely unable to pinpoint or address root causes. Social media and smartphone usage, declining religiosity, social isolation, and the civil-military cultural divide are often blamed. While these issues pervade American society at large, Marine leaders at all levels must

address them daily. The statistics are sobering:

- Nearly half of U.S. teens report using the Internet “almost constantly” and 95 percent of teens have access to a smartphone (up from 73 percent in 2015).²
- Nineteen, sixteen, and fifteen percent of teens report using YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat respectively “almost constantly.”³
- Rates of Major Depressive Episodes (suicide ideations, attempts, and deaths) rose 52 percent from 2005 to 2017 (from 8.7 to 13.2 percent of 12–17-year-olds).⁴
- 32 percent of teens and adolescents experience anxiety and depression from March 2020 to January 2022 (the cohort currently enlisting into the Corps).⁵
- Deaths of despair (alcohol, suicide, and drug overdose deaths) from 2013–2019 among white non-Hispanics without a four-year college degree (the vast majority of the Corps) increased by 41, 17, and 73 percent, respectively.⁶
- Despite a fifteen percent drop from 2020 to 2021, more than 500 Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard suicides occur each year.⁷

While Marines are individuals who join the Service with their own unique characteristics, these statistics should be considered carefully. They paint a picture of the societal context from which Marines emerge, engage, and return at the end of their service. Through an understanding of the severity of the moment, leaders can fulfill Krulak’s leadership imperative of returning Marines as quality citizens. As a father guides a son, leaders can help their Marines and sailors navigate life’s turbulent waters by helping them develop a philosophical toolkit to serve as the foundation of personal growth and a fount of resilience.

The Warrior Philosophy

Stoicism may seem to be in vogue to the casual observer. Promoted by popular philosophers like Ryan Holiday on social media (ironically)⁸ and included in Gen Mattis’ personal reading lists,⁹ Stoicism is an ancient philosophy that seeks to foster internal peace by divorcing individual emotion from external

“You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.”

—Marcus Aurelius



The essential Stoic leader, Roman Emperor and warrior: Marcus Aurelius. (Photo provided by author.)

circumstances. Stoicism does not seek to answer the metaphysical questions often pondered by religion but instead focuses on the practical—how to find internal peace in a turbulent world.

While Stoicism is the subject of extensive study, there are many easily-accessible principles relevant to modern leaders seeking to help Marines navigate through life’s challenges. First, one’s primary concern should be to “live according to nature.” That is, live in such a way that is in harmony with, and accepting of, the natural world.¹⁰ Second, much as there is both rain and sunshine, some things in life are within one’s control

while others are not. Third, peace and freedom can be found in understanding these realities and *choosing* not to suffer from conditions outside of one’s control. As Marcus Aurelius advises, “there is never any need ... to trouble your soul about things you cannot control. These things are not asking to be judged by you. Leave them alone.”¹¹ This emphasis on *choice* is the operative element of Stoic philosophy. Individual resilience can be forged when this choice is mentally rehearsed and combined with reflection, meditations on mortality, and confidence in one’s actions and acceptance of consequences.¹²

The applicability of this philosophical approach to life and leadership is recognized by many leaders but appears to escape many of the Corps’ junior members. Unlike the officers leading them, most junior servicemembers are never introduced to such practical philosophy upon which the traditional Marine Corps leadership traits and principles can be developed. Stoicism’s approach to dealing with life, be it personal or professional, equips individuals to observe, embrace, and endure life’s challenges. Stoicism teaches humility to accept fate, embrace trials, and grow from adversity. Stoicism, as Holiday writes, “provides much-needed strength, wisdom, and stamina.”¹³

Adopting Stoic Principles as Marine Leaders

Marine leaders can offer much to their Marines by applying Stoic philosophical principles while addressing contemporary leadership challenges. Leaders should consider the continued study of Stoic philosophy, sharing Stoicism with their Marines, and, like Marcus Aurelius, living as Stoic examples to the best of their ability.

1. Continued Study

Before leaders can share the timeless wisdom and practices of the ancients, leaders must seek to be studied and conversant in the language and foundations of history and philosophy. As a simple first step, Marine leaders should consider returning to the lessons they received during collegiate training as aspiring officers. The Stoic renaissance

is in full swing and interested leaders can easily find newly published translations of the ancient Stoic texts or more modern interpretations of the philosophy.¹⁴ Another source of material can be found in ADM Stockdale's writings. His biopic detailing his Prisoner of War

2. *Teach, Coach, and Mentor*

There is an old saying that a parent's role is to "prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child."¹⁶ Herein lies each modern Marine leader's challenge in such trying and chaotic times. After developing a foundational un-

derstanding of Stoic perspective on life. Modern leaders should be encouraged to follow suit; organize professional military education sessions; provide chapters or sections of pertinent Stoic literature as reading assignments; challenge Marines to think, write, and reflect on the material; and discuss the philosophy often in public and private. In so doing, leaders can infuse Stoic thought into their organizations to foster individual and collective resilience.

3. *Live It*

Finally, leaders must be the embodiment of Stoic principles. Studies and discussions are meaningless without concrete actions. Suffering Marines and sailors need leaders as positive role models who demonstrate mental and emotional resilience. As Marcus Aurelius exhorts in *Meditations*, "waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one." Leaders, it is time to be the "good men" our Marines need.

After developing a foundational understanding of Stoic principles, leaders should share this with those who need it most—our junior enlisted Marines and sailors.

experience *Courage Under Fire* and later reflections *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* takes readers on his journey from stumbling across Stoicism as a graduate student, subsequent obsession, and utilization of Stoic principles while in captivity and beyond.¹⁵

Understanding of Stoic principles, leaders should share this with those who need it most—our junior enlisted Marines and sailors. Seneca embodies the example here. His *Letters from a Stoic* are exactly that—letters to a younger student in which he explains, extolls, and encour-

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Reflect on your responsibility as a leader. Your position could be taken at any moment. This should generate gratitude and humility.

Living out Stoic principles involves internal reflection and external behaviors. First, prioritize time to reflect on your leadership. Ask, how are you responding to external circumstances in your organization? Are you controlling what is yours, influencing what is possible, and accepting what you must? Reflect on your responsibility as a leader. Your position could be taken at any moment. This should generate gratitude and humility. Finally, seek to always behave with calm. Such composure will take time to develop but will create a culture of trust. If subordinates know how their leaders will react in any given situation, they will be more confident in their actions, measured in their risks, and forthright in communications.

Conclusion

On that fateful day in 1965, as ADM Stockdale ejected from his Skyhawk, he considered himself strangely fortunate. Unlike most pilots shot down over North Vietnam, he was, thanks to his extensive training in Stoic philosophy, *Amor Fati*—accepting of his fate. As he hung suspended under his parachute, looking down at the rice field below, he recalled thinking “five years down there, at least. I’m leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.”¹⁷ His imprisonment ended up as seven long years in the Hanoi Hilton, the notorious North Vietnamese prison in which Stockdale turned into a Stoic laboratory. Those seven years of torture, misery, pain, deceit, and suffering were made survivable and meaningful by a foundation of philosophical training. Modern Marines are suffering in their own unique ways today and Honor, Courage, and Commitment alone are simply not enough to “prepare them for the road.” Marine leaders can do much to forge the Stoic philosophical foundation upon which Marines can thrive.

Notes

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3. Ibid.
4. J.M. Twenge, T.E. Joiner, M.E. Duffy, A.B. Cooper, and S.G. Binau, “Age, Period, and Cohort Trends in Mood Disorder Indicators and Suicide Related Outcomes in a Nationally Representative Dataset, 2005–2017,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 128, No. 3 (Summer 2019).
5. L. Harrison, B. Carducci, J.D. Klein, and Z.A. Bhutta, “Indirect Effects of Covid-19 on Child and Adolescent Mental Health: An Overview of Systematic Reviews,” *BMJ Global Health*, December 1, 2022, <https://gh.bmj.com/content/7/12/e010713>.
6. A. Case and A. Deaton, “The Great Divide: Education, Despair, and Death,” *Annual Review of Economics* 14, No. 1 (2022).
7. Liz Clark, *Department of Defense (DOD) Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) 1st Quarter, CY 2022*, (Washington DC: 2022), https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/2022QSR/TAB%20A_20220630_OFR_Rpt_Q1%20CY22%20QSR.pdf?ver=MTb1QAuRxaNWo3FJ2XqA%3D%3D.
8. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/dailystoic/?hl=en>.
9. N. Sherman, “A Surprising Lesson from the Stoics,” *Defense One*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/05/surprising-lesson-stoics/173104>.
10. Lucio Anneo Seneca and Ron Campbell (Translator), *Letters from a Stoic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).

11. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

12. See R.M. Kidder’s book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, for a discussion on the importance of mental rehearsal in making morally sound decisions.

13. Holiday, “What Is Stoicism? A Definition & 9 Stoic Exercises To Get You Started,” *Daily Stoic*, March 8, 2022, <https://dailystoic.com/what-is-stoicism-a-definition-3-stoic-exercises-to-get-you-started>.

The foundational Stoic publications include Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, Seneca’s *Letters From a Stoic*, and Epictetus’ *The Enchiridion*.

14. Two great introductory books to Stoicism written by modern philosophers include Ryan Holiday’s works and William B. Irvine’s *Guide to the Good Life*.

15. Also see Stockdale’s two “occasional papers” that make up his “Stockdale on Stoicism” project. These papers are much shorter and more immediately accessible. They are *The Stoic Warrior’s Triad: Tranquility, Fearlessness, and Freedom* (https://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/stoicism1.pdf) and *Master of My Fate* (https://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/Stoicism2.pdf).

16. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, (Hertogenbosch: Van Haren Publishing, 2018).

17. James Stockdale, “Stockdale on Stoicism II: Master of My Fate,” *Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics*, 2001, https://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/Stoicism2.pdf.

