

The Warfighter

Chapter 5

by LtCol J.J. Mullen

“Like war itself, our approach to warfighting must evolve. If we cease to refine, expand, and improve our profession, we risk becoming outdated, stagnant, and defeated.”¹

The preface of *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, charges us to read it, reread it, understand it, and take its message to heart. I struggled with that last part. Warfighting is a state of mind.² In order to take it to heart, it must be reconciled with existing personal philosophies.³

Marines are more than warriors, or leaders, or captains, or mechanics, or riflemen: Marines are *warfighters*. The warfighter subsumes our Corps’ values (honor-courage-commitment), our core competencies, our rank or MOS, and our leadership traits and principles. Currently, *MCDP 1* explains our warfighting philosophy but does not define the warfighter.

This article is an attempt to define the warfighter. It is written as a draft of a possible Chapter 5 of *Warfighting* in order to remind the reader of our foundational philosophy.

Chapter 5 The Warfighter

Maneuver warfare requires a well-defined mission, decentralized command and control (C²), and competent warfighters.⁴ We have discussed mission and C². Since human will is the driv-

Maneuver warfare requires a well-defined mission ...

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”

–Aristotle

“... no amount of subsequent planning can solve a problem insufficiently understood ...”

–MCWP 5–1

ing force of war, we must dig deeper to define the *warfighter*.⁵

The Warfighter

War, and maneuver warfare, is characterized by the interaction of physical, moral, and mental forces.⁶ These forces are inherent in the warfighter as well. (See Figure 1).⁷ Warfighters should seek to identify, understand, refine, and maximize these forces within themselves.

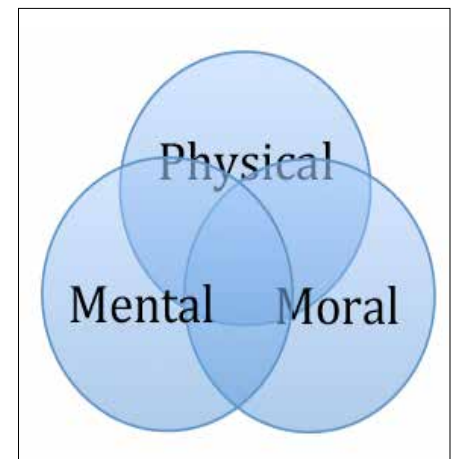


Figure 1. The Warfighter.

The Physical Force

The physical force is the easiest to define and measure. It is the power or strength possessed by the body and the endurance to apply it during hardship or adversity.⁸ We build the physical force in tangible ways: we run, perform pull-ups, or lift weights.

There are defined standards for individual physical strength, and because it can be easily assessed, it is sometimes given more attention than the other forces. It is essential to remember that a certain level of physical force is required because physical force is the *means* of war.⁹ However, physical forces are often

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inseparable from the moral and mental ones. It is the moral force that drives our physical selves to cover a grenade for our fellow Marines and our mental faculties that calculate the chances of survival.¹⁰

The physical force lends strength to our knowledge and a sharp edge to our moral convictions.

The Mental Force

The mental force can be thought of as knowledge. Knowledge is the combination and application of experience and education.¹¹ Experience is practical knowledge or skill derived from direct observation, the sum of everything lived through. Education is training by formal or informal instruction, whether through self-paced reading or classroom instruction.¹²

Warfighters must pursue knowledge. The more we know and understand, the more we will effectively and rapidly exploit decisive opportunities.¹³ Knowledge builds awareness and is a key ingredient in judgment, dependability, and decisiveness.

The mental force directs our physical force and gives depth to the moral.

The Moral Force

The moral force consists of the intangible pieces of humanity that are left over when you have sorted everything else into the physical or mental categories.¹⁴ The moral force is both personal and collective, and it is a key ingredient in all those traits the Marine Corps wants a warfighter to possess but cannot issue: justice, integrity, unselfishness, courage, enthusiasm, and loyalty.

Fortunately, our collective moral force has a name: *Semper Fidelis* (*Always Faithful*). *Semper Fidelis* is the invisible, but indelible, mark upon the spirit of every Marine who has ever earned the title. Faithful is a good word for the warfighter: faith is an allegiance to duty or a person; firm belief in something for which there is no proof; complete trust.¹⁵ Warfighters are *always faithful*: to each other, to their god, and to their country.

Each warfighter uses different words to define their personal moral force.¹⁶ A warfighter codifies it in writing, reflects upon it, and remains faithful to it. Our



We train to the physical and mental preparedness for war. (Photo by Sgt Sarah Anderson.)

moral force guides us; if we believe in nothing, we go nowhere.

The moral force drives and unites the physical and mental, for war is driven ultimately by the human will.

Combined Arms Application of Physical, Mental, and Moral Forces

The application of combined arms is central to our philosophy of maneuver warfare.¹⁷ All three forces should be applied in such a way that the enemy seeks relief from one only to be struck by another. He may dodge our mental forces (find a way to outsmart our tactics) but be met by increased physical force. Sometimes our enemy is hard to define,

The Balance

Equilibrium is key: the most effective warfighter maintains a balance of all three forces. The goal is not to be the fastest or smartest or most devoted, but rather to find “a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”¹⁸ The balance is different for everyone. Some warfighters are inherently physically stronger or grew up surrounded by people of good character some are exceptionally intelligent. Every warfighter must routinely spend time in self-reflection to determine which force requires attention and shift effort as required. There are many areas where the forces

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and sometimes we are our own enemy. These three forces should be brought to bear as appropriate: confronted by a breach of ethics, we can reinforce the gap with knowledge; physical injury may be assuaged by deeper faith; ignorance can be mitigated by strength.

overlap (see Figure 1); for example, moral strength can motivate you up a hill long past the time your legs tell you to quit.¹⁹

Focusing on two of the three forces is not enough. For example, if a warfighter failed to adequately develop one of these forces:

Physical and mental, without moral. This warfighter is uninspired and lacks focus. All the knowledge and muscle in the world cannot compensate for a lack of moral force. It is the moral force that brings the mental and physical forces to bear on the enemy in the last yards. The warfighter who has physical and mental strength but no faith is deceptively dangerous; they seem competent on the surface, but perceptive subordinates instinctively understand that something is missing. This warfighter wanders into spiritual pitfalls and may break and run during hardship. The moral force guides our decisions and anchors a warfighter during adversity or challenge.

Moral and physical, without mental. This warfighter is ignorant and shortsighted, lacking the mental acumen to apply moral and physical strength efficiently and effectively. Shallow and unimaginative, they flounder when confronted by wicked problems. Education and experience are required to develop a knowledgeable warfighter who can leverage realistic solutions to impossible problems. The mental force tempers moral and physical strength.

Moral and mental, without physical. This warfighter is weak, lacking the physical strength required to endure wars. This warfighter may be intelligent and may even have good intentions and imagination. However, a physically weak person will stumble during adversity. Physical strength is the bulwark of our moral and mental selves.

Conclusion

Warfighters consist of physical, mental, and moral forces. Moral strength can be cultivated, physical strength can be built, and mental strength can be developed. These forces, however, require constant investment; if ignored, they erode. Warfighters must seek self-awareness and work to maximize existing forces in order to become as knowledgeable, physically strong, and morally focused as possible.



Physical strength is the hard work of our moral and mental self. (Photo by Sgt Sarah Anderson.)

Education and experience are required to develop a knowledgeable warfighter ...

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 20 June 1997), Preface by Gen Alfred M. Gray.
2. Ibid., "It [maneuver warfare] is a state of mind," 96.
3. Ibid., "It requires a concept that is consistently effective across the full spectrum of conflict because we cannot attempt to change our basic doctrine from situation to situation and expect to be proficient," 71.
4. While these components of warfighting are not prescribed in a list form in the first four chapters of *Warfighting*, the importance of competent warfighters, decentralized C², and a clearly stated mission are reiterated throughout. I would encourage Marines to read and reread *Warfighting*. Marines should be able to articulate the philosophy of maneuver warfare in three minutes or less to a layman. Without

a clear understanding of war—and warfighting—it is difficult to understand the *warfighter*.

5. *MCDP 1*, 14 and 19.

6. Ibid., "War is characterized by the interaction of physical, moral, and mental forces," 15. Also, "The aim [of maneuver warfare] is to render the enemy incapable of resisting effectively by shattering his moral, mental, and physical cohesion—his ability to fight as an effective, coordinated whole," 73.

7. Ibid., "Each belligerent is not a unitary force, but a complex system consisting of numerous physical, moral, and mental components as well as the relationships among them," 45.

8. *Dictionary.com*, s.v. "strength," accessed on 15 February 2014 at <http://dictionary.reference.com>.

9. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 75, "War is thus an act of force to compel an enemy to do our will." Although war is ultimately driven by the human will, the result of that will is either the threat or application of organized violence (physical force).

10. Cpl Jason Lee Dunham (10 November 1981–22 April 2004), USMC, was awarded the Medal of Honor while serving with 3rd Bn, 7th Marines during the Iraq War. While on a patrol in Husaybah, his unit was attacked, and he deliberately covered an enemy grenade to

save nearby Marines. When it exploded Dunham was seriously injured and died eight days later. Accessed on 11 February 2014 at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

11. Generalized summation of “knowledge,” *Wikipedia*, accessed on 12 February 2014 at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

12. This is just a beginning. Clausewitz, *On War*, states “Parenthetically, it should be noted that the seeds of wisdom that are to bear fruit in the intellect are sown less by critical studies and learned monographs than by insights, broad impressions, and flashes of intuition,” 85.

13. *MCDP 1*, “Mental forces provide the ability to grasp complex battlefield situations; to make effective estimates, calculations, and decisions; to devise tactics and strategies; and to develop plans,” 16.

14. *Ibid.*, “Moral forces are difficult to grasp and impossible to quantify. We cannot easily gauge forces like national and military resolve, national or individual conscience, emotion, fear, courage, morale, leadership, or esprit.” For the warfighter, the moral forces boil down to even

more individual areas: hope, faith, and justice, to name a few. This is where the mental force collides with the moral: education and research is key to development. Wandering around in our own minds is not enough to develop the moral force; we must also educate ourselves. Aristotle wrote, “We are not studying in order to know what virtue is, but to become good, for otherwise there would be no profit in it,” 16.

15. *Dictionary.com*, *s.v.* “faith,” accessed on 15 February 2014 at <http://dictionary.reference.com>.

16. An inability to articulate personal morals/values/beliefs indicates that they are ill-defined. A Marine should be able to articulate the philosophy of maneuver warfare in three minutes or less to a layman. By the same logic, a warfighter should be able to define their personal moral code in three minutes or less to anyone who asks.

17. *MCDP 1*, “Combined arms is the full integration of arms in such a way that to counteract one, the enemy must become more vulnerable to another. We pose the enemy not just with a problem, but with a dilemma—a no-win situation,” 94.

18. Clausewitz, 89. Although Clausewitz was not discussing these three forces (he was discussing his trinity from Chapter One), his idea of balance fits this model well.

19. *Ibid.*, “When we speak of destroying the enemy’s forces we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: the moral element must also be considered. The two interact throughout: they are inseparable,” 97.



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