

# Rebuilding Marine Corps Resilience

Five key changes for a stronger force

by LtCol Mike Vincent (Ret)

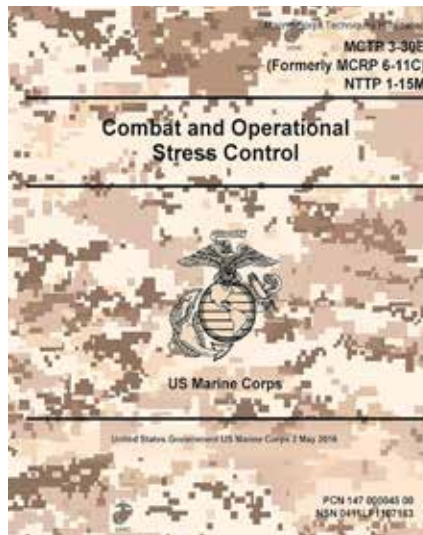
**M**arines do not quit. We adapt. We overcome. We maneuver. However, when it comes to how we teach resilience, we are stuck. The system is not working as well as it should, and our Marines are paying the price. If we want to turn back the tide on active-duty suicides and condition not a disability (CND) administrative separations (ADSEPs) and fully apply our warfighting philosophy, we need to do better. Here are five things I would change about the Marine Corps' approach to resilience today. These are the low-hanging fruits, but they have the potential to get some momentum going in a new direction.

## Policy Updates: Stop Referencing an Outdated Manual

If the Marine Corps is serious about making this website (<https://www.fitness.marines.mil/Resilience>) the one-stop shop for resilience, then get the basics right. One of the primary publications highlighted on the website, *MCRP 6-11C, Combat and Operational Stress Control*, has not been *MCRP 6-11C* since 2016. It was redesignated as *MCTP 3-30E* nearly a decade ago. Yet, we still reference the old title. That is more than just an administrative mistake. Marines notice these things.

Even worse, the definition of resilience is not consistent. On page 1–2, it is described as “the ability to withstand adversity without being significantly affected.” On page 1–3, it is defined as “the process of preparing for, recovering from, and adjusting to life in the face of stress, adversity, trauma, or tragedy.”

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**The MCRP 6-11C, Combat and Operational Stress Control, was redesignated as MCTP 3-30E in 2016. (Photo provided by author.)**

It is not just the fact that there seems to be no consensus on the definition—it is also this notion that a resilient person can “withstand adversity without being significantly affected.” That is insulting. A resilient person does not “bounce back.” They adapt to life with new dents and scars. The ability to do that is the process of “adjusting to life in the face of stress.”

The second definition is better, and we need to pick one and apply it consistently across all resilience policies and training materials.



**A position safety officer from CLB-6 monitors crew-served weapons training. (Photo by author.)**

## Reference Materials: Ditch the Marine Leader's Guide on Resilience

The *Marine Leader's Guide on Resilience* is a summary and review of Eric Greitens' book, *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life*. That is a problem.

Greitens, a former Missouri governor, resigned amid allegations of sexual assault and campaign finance misconduct. If we are going to talk about resilience, we cannot marginalize the essential role that moral authority plays. Keeping his book in our recommended resources undermines that completely.

We need a new Marine leader's guide—one that reflects the ethos of our Corps. A strong replacement? *Make Your Bed* by ADM William H. McRaven, a book grounded in discipline, mindset, and practical leadership.

## Reading List Renewal: Update It for 2025

The last time the Resilience Reading List was updated was in 2020. Marines are expected to train for the next war, not the last one; why is our reading list not keeping up? Here are three books that could be added immediately:

- *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown (Leadership through vulnerability and courage).
- *Can't Hurt Me* by David Goggins (Extreme mental agility and overcoming adversity).
- *Atomic Habits* by James Clear (Developing high-performance habits for resilience).

## Additional Links: Give Marines the Full Picture

If we want a serious discussion about resilience, we need to include real analysis on whether our programs are working. Two major studies should be added to the site's "Additional Links" section:

- RAND Corporation's *Evaluation of the Marine Corps' Combat and Operational Stress Control Program* (Evaluation of the Operational Stress



**The commanding officer of CLB-6 giving feedback to Marines and sailors while participating in a strategic mobility exercise.** (Photo by author.)

Control and Readiness (OSCAR) Program|RAND).

- The Marine Corps' *Resilience Research Project* (CAOCL-TECOM RESILIENCE FINAL REPORT 21 Aug 2013.pdf).

Both provide valuable insight into what we are getting right and, more importantly, what we need to fix.

## Video Content: Stop Talking About "Toughness" and Start Talking About Adaptability

The Intro to Resiliency video with Chaplain Aaron Fuller? Needs an update. Maj Wade's video on mental fitness? Needs a full overhaul. We must move past the outdated mindset of "bouncing back" and "toughness." In-



**A boxer adapts and adjusts to avoid his opponent's strengths.** (Photo by Wade Austin Ellis on Unsplash.)

stead, we need to focus on mental agility: the ability to rapidly cycle through a variety of options to think critically, adapt, and overcome challenges in dynamic environments.

One of the videos on mental fitness posits that the barrier to learning is fear. I would propose instead that it is a rigid mindset rooted in steadfastness. The Resilience Research Project referenced above does a good job of validating that. The social and environmental pressure to remain loyal without budging can have the unintended consequence of suppressing independent thought and cognitive agility. This is the toxic Rocky

Balboa approach to resilience: "It's not how hard you hit, it's how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward."

That approach leads Rocky to traumatic brain injury and early retirement in *Rocky V*.

Want a better message? We should resurrect Gunny Highway's legendary line from *Heartbreak Ridge*: "Improvise, adapt, and overcome." We should challenge Marines to think beyond steadfastness and *holding the hill* to recognize that rigidity is the enemy of resilience.

This is why I like *Rocky III* best. (Sorry, all of you *Rocky IV* fans. I do love that one, too.) After tragedy strikes, Rocky's friend and former rival teaches him to change his fighting style to avoid his enemy's strengths. If we do not teach our warfighters to think independently and critically, we are failing them. We need to be like *Rocky III*.

## Final Thought: This Is Just the Start

An analysis of the Defense Suicide Prevention Office reports from 2010 through 2023 indicates a concerning upward trend in suicide rates among active-duty Marine Corps personnel. In 2010, there were 37 reported suicides within the Marine Corps. By 2023, this number had risen to 64, corresponding to a rate of 34.5 per 100,000 service members.

Furthermore, during my tenure as a battalion commander, the number one reason we had to ADSEP a Marine or sailor was for a mental or behavioral health-related condition not a disability—not drugs, not the commission of a serious offense, but a behavioral health diagnosis like adjustment disorder or depressed mood disorder.

If we are serious about resilience, then we need to do more than talk about it. We need to ask the hard questions about the effectiveness of our current Combat and Operational Stress Control program. These five changes are only easy, low-hanging fruit to start a conversation. If we want to turn back the tide on active-duty suicides and ADSEPS and reinforce our warfighting philosophy, we must make resilience a living, evolving part of Marine Corps culture rooted in adaptability.

