

The Ethical Warrior and the Combat Mindset

Working through some of the tough questions

by Jack E. Hoban & LtCol Joseph Shusko, USMC(Ret)

The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) is a combatives system comprised of three synergistic disciplines: physical, mental, and character. The end state of the program is to make an ethical Marine warrior, committed to protect the life of self and others—all others, killing only when necessary to protect life. The ethics of the warrior drive the tactics of the warrior; ethical tactics suggest the technical skills required by the warrior. MCMAP teaches the moral and physical skills of a protector, which differ significantly from those used in, for example, sport martial arts or even common self-defense scenarios. Some of the differences are technical and/or tactical. Among other things, MCMAP is weapons oriented and based upon a team fight approach. However, MCMAP is different philosophically as well, because MCMAP skills are designed to protect *self and others*—all others, if possible. Self-defense skills are important and necessary; anyone would protect themselves if possible. Even criminals protect themselves. Marine warriors go way beyond self-defense; they are protectors of others. Sport martial arts, while having many benefits, are also basically about the self: physical fitness, exercising internal competitive urges, responding to the desire to win or gain a prize or trophy. MCMAP is philosophically different at the core. Another difference is that MCMAP, as part of the continuum of force concept, may have to be used to kill another human being. Killing is cer-

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tainly outside the scope of sport martial arts. This grave responsibility—killing to protect life—is entrusted to the ethical Marine warrior because he puts himself at risk to protect others. This risk is both physical *and psychological*, as will be discussed later in this article.

The Combat Mindset

One way of describing the combat mindset is the ability to maintain a

professional frame of mind despite the physical and emotional stresses of war. Professionals are able to focus on accomplishment of the mission without being overwhelmed by the natural emotional reactions to stress and combat, such as fear, anger, desire for revenge, bloodlust, and other counterproductive tendencies. Professionalism under fire can be developed through a combination of mental toughness, conscious ethical discipline,



MCMAP may have to be used to kill the enemy. It is not sport martial arts. (Photo by authors.)

and consistent physical training. Warrior ethics (moral protector values in action) are the “true north” that guides us through the debilitating physiological challenges, stress, and emotions that typically assail Marines in the “fog of war.” The training kicks in, and we do what needs to be done. In short, a combat mindset is a manifestation of the combined ethical, tactical, and physical disciplines. A combat mindset allows us to accomplish the mission with honor, courage, and commitment.

When first exposed to MCMAP it may be a challenge to understand the total and far-reaching benefits of the

the *tactical movement methodology* that is the thread. This movement concept is being refined and taught in MCMAP through the combat engagement pattern and other drills and is articulated in MCMAP’s motto of “one mind, any weapon.”

How Do We Fit It All In?

MCMAP is a martial skills enhancer, an excellent combat conditioning regimen, and a sure-fire way to build camaraderie, to which any Marine who has shared the bonding feeling of shared adversity can attest. But MCMAP is also one of the greatest timesavers and

are putting those days behind us as the instructor cadre matures and the training methodologies evolve and become more refined. The bottom line is that, with the proper training methodology, injuries can be minimized without degrading effectiveness. After all, nothing is less effective than a Marine who is too hurt to train or has become combat disqualified due to injuries, whether those injuries came from improper MCMAP training, a poor running style, or an overly enthusiastic drive to the net in a basketball game. Most importantly, the MCMAP training can be effective, appropriate, and valuable for a Marine throughout his career, even through his 40s, 50s, 60s, and later. We have all heard of the martial arts master who is healthy and training—still going strong—late into life. Why can’t the same be true for our MCMAP master practitioners? It can!

Why the Ethics?

One of the interesting things that has come out of MCMAP is a clarified concept of an ethical Marine warrior. Ethics are moral values in action. What are moral values? They are, of course, all the great values that protect life, a special subset of which is our Marine Corps core values of honor, courage, and commitment. But this is the point: almost everyone is moral; that is, they know right from wrong. But are they ethical? Without the confidence to *act* upon our moral values, we are not ethical. MCMAP training definitely helps in the areas of skill and confidence, developing moral people into ethical Marine warriors. The opposite is also a danger, however. Without the moral training (delivered through the MCMAP values-based tie-ins), we risk creating people who will act, but perhaps not ethically and in accordance with our core values. The physical without the moral can create bullies; the moral without the physical may fail to create ethical Marine warriors. There is no escaping the moral-physical connection that is ethics.

Dealing With the Enemy

With such an emphasis on values, do we risk making Marines “too ethical”

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program for all Marines. The purpose of this article is to explore and analyze some of the less obvious aspects of MCMAP that can, nonetheless, be of great value to individual Marines and the Corps as whole.

We Use Weapons!

One of the key principles of counterinsurgency is the disciplined use of force. MCMAP exposes every Marine to a broad continuum of force options, from firm and respectful language, through non-lethal techniques for subduing and capturing the enemy, through close quarter (self and others) protection methods, and right through to actual killing techniques. At this point there is not a true continuum from MCMAP on through to the close quarter shooting skills, but there should be. This is a future goal the Corps might consider. In terms of the physical skills themselves, the same individual tactical movement skills that apply to unarmed combat also apply to combat armed with a knife, bayonet, or weapon of opportunity. They apply to tactical, close-in fire and maneuver shooting as well. It is

force multipliers at the disposal of a creative leader. The reason is that the bonding that follows the physical training creates the perfect atmosphere for candid discussions of essential subjects, annual training requirements, values-based tie-ins, and other important topics, such as vehicle safety, drinking, sexual harassment, suicide prevention, etc. Why waste time moving people to a classroom? Reach them while they are openminded and energized, and perhaps hit several targets with one shot and with better results!

Possible Injury?

One of the myths about martial arts training is that it has to be injury producing and tough to be truly effective. It doesn’t. While a little pain is fine and necessary, injuries are not. Except for the occasional accident, injuries are for the most part preventable. It is very counterintuitive and difficult for some young, sincere instructors and practitioners to accept that harder is not always better. In the adolescence of the program we did have some Marines who trained counterproductively hard. We

to deal with an immoral and implacable enemy? This is a question we agonized over. It comes down to this: should Marines be trained as “killers” or “protectors”? Are protectors as prepared for the realities of war as killers? Will ethics training somehow make us “soft” and less capable of accomplishing the mission? Anecdotally, one may hear both sides of the argument from sincere people who have “been there.” After a lot of thought, we still don’t know the answer definitively. But consider the following scenarios. You are walking through a forest and see a killer grizzly bear. Would you be afraid? Almost definitely so. Or you are walking through a forest and see a grizzly bear with two cubs. Would you be less afraid or more? Most people would say more afraid. Even in nature, it seems the protector is more dangerous than the killer. One thing we do know is there are severe psychological risks in training moral people to become killers, as will be discussed below.

What Is the Combat Mindset?

As alluded to above, a combat mindset can be described as the ability to “do the right thing” under extreme emotional, psychological, and physical adversity or stress. This includes the ability to override the emotions (including the fight, freeze, or flight mechanism) and act “professionally” to accomplish the mission in accordance with a Marine’s moral and physical training. (See Figure 1.)

You may notice that there are several important concepts above highlighted in quotes. That is because they are difficult to pin down. When subjected to stress and danger people tend to behave in basically one of two ways. One is called “affective,” that is, emotionally. Emotional behavior is usually ineffective in times of great danger when critical decisions need to be made and acted upon. The other behavior is called “effective” behavior, and that is the behavior of a predator. The predator is cold and rational, like an animal intent on killing for food.

Marine training, especially MCMAP training, is designed to create a

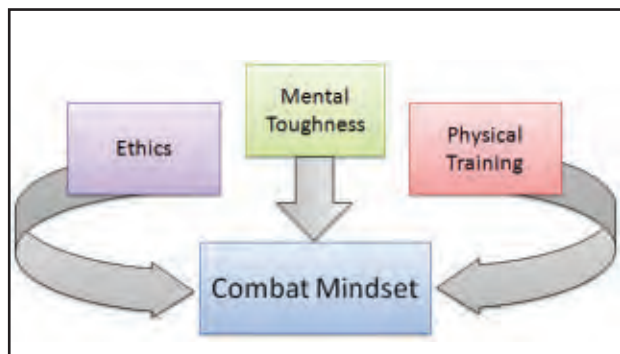


Figure 1. Doing the right thing. (Courtesy of authors.)

third behavior option: that of the ethical Marine warrior, protector of life. Whose life? Self and others. Which others? All others, if possible, and killing only to protect life. This seemingly oxymoronic statement—killing only to protect life—is the behavior of the ethical Marine warrior. It is predator-like, in that it is cold and professional. But the objective is to protect, killing only when necessary.

Addressing PTS and Wounded Warriors

Experience is proving that MCMAP is a physical-ethical training regimen that can “inoculate” Marines from the stress of combat and mediate the effects of posttraumatic stress (PTS) afterward. There is sufficient evidence that war and killing is so abhorrent to normal humans that it is inherently damaging to virtually everyone who participates. In fact, it could be said that it would be unnatural if people—even Marines—didn’t get some degree of PTS from exposure to war.

Research has shown that disrespect or dehumanization of the enemy exacerbates PTS. MCMAP’s ethical warrior training “calibrates the moral compass” by clarifying the 1776 values that life is a universal value shared by all people and, therefore, that “all men are created equal.” Our respect for the dual life value (DLV) of self and others safeguards our humanity and sets us apart from our enemies who do not respect the lives of others outside of their “in group.”

Marines are taught to respect the enemy’s life and yet recognize, through the rules of engagement, when the enemy’s behavior is life-threatening to fellow

Marines and other people within their area of responsibility. In other words, Marines kill to protect life.

The DLV of self and others is the “magnetic north” of the moral compass. The ethical warrior orients himself under the stress of combat by using the DLV as the supporting premise of his other moral values, including his Marine Corps core values. MCMAP grounds and sustains Marines in the DLV and

the core values.

There is ample scientific evidence to support the premise that intellectual lessons stick better when taught in conjunction with physical exercise. One of the most important, yet unheralded, phenomena of MCMAP is that we see that moral lessons too are best delivered in context of physical training (especially MCMAP training but also combat conditioning). In other words, to develop ethical warriors, realistic physical training and values-based tie-ins work best in combination rather than separately.

In order to counteract the effects of posttraumatic stress disorder, research has shown that a “purification process” is required afterward that mediates the stress and grief of combat. MCMAP allows Marines to:

- Decompress with challenging physical training, exercise, and shared adversity in a controlled setting.
- Share experiences during guided discussions with fellow Marines who have been there.
- Recalibrate their moral compasses through the values-based tie-ins.
- Train with and recover with other Marines.

MCMAP training develops ethical Marine warriors, provides a physical outlet for stress, activates respect for all life (including the enemy’s) and, most importantly, functions as a “rite of purification” that is shared with brother warriors.

The following is a direct quote from a Marine wounded warrior who practiced MCMAP as part of his recovery:

The [physical, mental, character] synergy of MCMAP was a huge help to

my recovery and rehabilitation. My big problem of transitioning back into the real world has been the idea that I killed and did something against God. The morals of MCMAP let me know that I was doing the right thing on both of my deployments and that I had just cause for my actions. Mind you I was on two heavy combat deployments but regardless the three disciplines have helped tremendously. This is the one area where I would stress getting this information out to the wounded population at heavy doses. It helps . . . end of sentence! [MCMAP] is bottom line the most fulfilling, ethical, and helpful program the US Marine Corps has in existence. I could not suggest a better situation to put Marines, injured or not, through. This program has helped me and I'm positive it would do the same for others.

Make MCMAP Sustainable and Valuable

Every Marine, regardless of age, can benefit from MCMAP, but it has to make sense for them, and we are all different. In addressing senior Marines who feel they are “too old,” or too important to get hurt, we say, “So participate at a level that makes sense for you, but participate.” For one thing, you will be leading by example, and that is important. But that is only one reason. The other reason is that *you* need it. The physical-mental-moral regimen is mutually reinforcing for you also. Senior Marines need confidence and skills, too, although they can become good at rationalizing away insecurity. Even more, they need to be ethical, and ethics are moral-physical. It is harder to make a moral person physical (ethical) than it is to make a physical person moral (ethical). Can you see that when you cease becoming physical, you risk becoming less confident in your moral actions? And simple exercise in the gym or jogging around the base just can't activate the “protecting others” proclivity like MCMAP training. One of the future goals of MCMAP should be to create a master's regimen that speaks to the ethical, tactical, and physical interests and needs of senior Marines.



Every Marine benefits from MCMAP. (Photo by authors.)

Summary

MCMAP is a total development program for ethical Marine warriors at every level. Consider the profound cultural and values development that starts in boot camp and Officer Candidates School as we start to transform civilians into Marines. Should it end there? MCMAP can be the thread that runs from boot camp through our entire time in the Corps, whether it is one enlistment or a lifetime of service. We have different MOSs—yes. We have different billets and duty stations—okay. But we can have one consistent program connecting us ethically, mentally, culturally, and physically. This is what MCMAP can be. The end state is the ethical Marine warrior—a professional whose moral values and physical training result in

the ability to maintain a combat mindset under adversity. Every Marine can benefit from the physical training and the morally activating values-based tie-ins, and all Marines, regardless of rank or MOS, should participate. A final benefit of MCMAP needs to be seriously researched. Can the physical-moral training act to inoculate Marines against the stress of combat and help mediate that stress afterward? These are questions that need to be researched more rigorously.




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