

# Stress and Resilience in the U.S Marine Corps

The Corps is missing an opportunity

by Frank J. Tortorello, Jr.



*Are they more resilient than we think? Is the current definition of resilience inadequate? (Photo by Sgt Tammy Hinline.)*

When it comes to thinking about and designing training for combat and operational stress control, the Marine Corps is missing an opportunity. Currently the Corps explains stress as a function of brains and hormones. Supposedly, stress works like this: When a Marine's life is threatened or when a Marine suffers a serious injury, brain and hormonal activity are triggered. If the activity goes on for too long or in the wrong way, it can cause persistent anxiety or nightmares. In severe cases, brain malfunction can cause a Marine to think suicidal thoughts.<sup>1</sup> Logically, then, resilience is the ability of the brain to not malfunction or to recover if it does.

The Corps' Operational Stress Control and Readiness (known as "OS-CAR") program trains the majority of Marines to be "sensors" whose role is to detect stress symptoms in other Marines using color-coded symptom identification cards and direct stressed Marines to the right resources such as a chaplain. Leaders are trained to conduct training that is thought to inoculate Marines to stress (tough, realistic training) and to create a command climate in which it is

okay to report a stress injury in the same way Marines would report a gunshot wound or broken leg.<sup>2</sup> Chaplains and leaders are trained to refer distressed (severe case) Marines—for example, a Marine who cannot function effectively on a patrol—to embedded psychologists or psychiatrists.

But what happens to this setup if we change the perspective from looking at stress and resilience as brain functions to something that Marines do? What do we see Marines actually saying and doing when they are being stressed and when they are being resilient? Let's take a look at a real Marine in a real combat situation who looks like he would be a textbook case for suffering combat and posttraumatic stress: Sgt James "Eddie"

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Wright. In Iraq in April 2004, then-Cpl Wright was in a Humvee convoy when he and his fellow Marines were ambushed. As Wright puts it:

Our Humvee was in the kill zone, and we were taking a lot of fire. A rocket-propelled grenade hit the weapon I was holding, an M-249 SAW, and just blew my hands off and blew my leg open. My femur was fractured and sticking out. My artery was hit, too, and bleeding like crazy. One of the Marines was able to put the tourniquets on.

I was irritated that I couldn't pull the trigger. I was thinking, "D—, I can't shoot back. What can I do?" What I could do was talk to my Marines and issue orders and supervise. I was still in a leadership position even though I didn't have my hands. And that probably kept me from going into shock and from sitting there thinking about my hands.<sup>3</sup>

To add some information, Wright actually instructed other Marines in the Humvee (who were also wounded) to apply tourniquets for him. So what should we learn about stress and resilience from Wright's example?

The first thing we notice in changing our perspective from what brains do to what Marines do is that the current Marine Corps explanation of stress is inadequate. It would have led us to predict that Wright would have gone into some form of shock, either biological (a rapid rise in heart rate and a rapid decrease in blood pressure) or psychological (panicking, freezing, or, otherwise "freaking out"). Supposed triggers and causes of stress and distress were present in abundance. Mysteriously, however, none of the effects occurred, and just as mysteriously, there is no *biological* way to explain why. Scientifically, the Corps' current explanation cannot account for the reality of what Sgt Wright said and did during the event.

Second, if we take what Marines say and do seriously, then Wright himself explains his own resilience. He chose to focus on his responsibilities rather than his wounds. More specifically, he intelligently and creatively reconceptualized who he was in order to pursue values such as being a good leader and acting

courageously. Wright had a concept of himself as a trigger-puller, but in losing his hands, that way of being a Marine was closed off to him. He chose to think about ways he could continue to contribute, which is itself an expression of his prioritization of the values of teamwork, effectiveness, and mission accomplishment over himself, his lack of capabilities, or his potential death. Wright made a decision to reorient himself as a Marine in order to embody values important to him. The upshot is this: Wright's resilience is to be explained by reference to *him*—his choices, his concepts, his values, his actions—not his brain or hormones, or their functioning.

Third, we are invited to think in a different way about the relationship of Marines to their bodies. Brains do not cause Marines to behave—to have nightmares or to be angry or to commit suicide. The science behind the issue can be illustrated with a short thought experiment. Let's say we are standing together watching a neighbor back his car out of his driveway and park it in a spot further down the street. A friend of ours standing nearby then asks us, "What was that about?" Would our answer be, "Well, I guess the engine wanted to be further down the street"? No, because engines do not have the capability of *causing* a car and driver to behave in such ways. Engines *enable* the movement of cars, but we operate them. Similarly (but not exactly), we use our brains and what those brains afford to us in terms of capabilities. Brains do not control who we are or what we do any more than the car engine controls our neighbor's driving.

So, recruits need to learn what an ambush is *before* they can be stressed about it. Our brains or bodies do not "read" the environment and react to it. This is why the Corps spends so much time and effort in training! Surely, then, the Marine Corps cannot mean that brains cause Marines to behave, and this is all the more reason to reconsider the present approach.

If these three lessons are accurate, then the reality of stress and resilience is to be found in the personal and social concepts and values of Marines. Let me illustrate this with a historical example.

During the Battle of Guadalcanal in World War II, Marine Sgt O.J. Marion wrote the following report after a mission:

We were observing and were carefully camouflaged. We heard a little sound and then saw two Japs crawl by about 7 feet away from us. These Japs were unarmed. We started to shoot them, but did not do so as we remembered our mission. Then, 15 yards later came 8 armed Japs. They were walking slowly and carefully. . . . When I got back, we had a lot of discussion as to why the two Japs in front were not armed. . . . I believe they were the point of the patrol and were unarmed so they could crawl better.<sup>4</sup>

The sergeant reports a certain kind of stress that is evident in two actions: the decision to fire then to not fire, and the extensive discussion after the event.

We might ask, "What was this stress and what was it about?" The stress, I want to argue, was the sergeant's inability to make sense out of what had been seen. All of Sgt Marion's cognitive and perceptual mechanisms were functioning just fine, of course; he saw that there were crawling Japanese soldiers in front of him, he knew he was in the jungle on Guadalcanal, and he knew he was on an observation mission, so the source is not some malfunctioning mechanism. It is clear too that he and his Marines were not gripped with fear since they were making rational decisions like not opening fire because they wanted to respect their mission parameters. The inability actually came from the sergeant's lack of a conception of what a Japanese combat patrol looked like and how one was supposed to work.

Now we might ask, "Why couldn't the Marines figure it out on the spot? After all, the Japanese soldiers were right there in front of them." Well, the Marines could figure it out, but not on the spot. They needed time and, importantly, discussion to come to a tentative conclusion. Why? The answer centers on culturally specific values: No American Marine would be on a combat patrol without a weapon on purpose, and Marine combat patrols do not include positioning two unarmed, crawling men as point. Because the Japanese practice

violated these principles, the Americans needed time to discuss and then adjust their concepts of what the novelty they encountered actually meant. More speculatively, isn't it an important ethical principle for Americans that we not shoot unarmed enemies?

Because of the lack of concepts and cross-cultural value conflicts, the achievement of another value orientation was jeopardized: mission accomplishment. The initial ambiguity about whether to fire had to do with the Marines trying to honor their commitment to completing their mission. The question is, how do you accomplish your mission when you don't know what you're looking at because what you're looking at contradicts your deepest beliefs about how you conduct yourself on the battlefield? The point then is to educate Marines about novelty and to give them practice in working through adjustments to their conceptions and

their values. Outcomes are never assured when actual human beings are involved, and this is why what Marines accomplish so consistently in training and in combat is so magnificent.

So what would resilience training focus on if the Corps looked at Marines as value-oriented concept users? Let's complement the examples of Sgts Wright and Marion. During the 2012 Resilience Research Project, sponsored by the Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) and Training and Education Command (TECom), a group of recruits was asked what stressed them the most during their recruit training.<sup>5</sup> One recruit said he hated making his rack over and over again because, in his mind, there was nothing military about it. He interpreted the activity as meaningless against a larger understanding of what counted as properly "military." As he answered, another recruit laughed

and said he loved making his rack because he was under no pressure. He knew that he knew how to make his rack, he could do it over and over again, and he knew it would be rejected by his drill instructor no matter what he did. He interpreted the seemingly meaningless activity as an opportunity to relax.

We now have three examples—these two recruits, Sgt Marion, and Sgt Wright—that highlight real or imagined inability to create meaningfulness as a potential stressor. In all three cases we have Marines choosing to adjust their concepts and values in ways that *make* their situations meaningful—or not. Some adjustments were quick and worked out personally (Sgt Wright), but others took time and worked out interactively (Sgt Marion).

While both sergeants were committed to accomplishing their missions, an important difference was that Sgt Wright possessed certain key concepts—Marine leadership and what it meant to be in service to fellow Marines—while Sgt Marion was missing key concepts—what a Japanese patrol looked like and the appropriateness of going on patrol unarmed. Sgt Wright chose to use his intelligence to readjust his concepts, but Sgt Marion had no such choice. He could only refer to his mission orders as a way to bridge the conceptual gap between what he was supposed to do and what he saw in front of him. The two recruits, meanwhile, alert us that, in the absence of meaning because of missing concepts, the same experience can come out very differently—Marines, like all people, will fill in concepts and values whether the Corps provides them or not.

All three cases therefore suggest that the Corps would do well to give Marines the opportunity to systematically engage with conceptual and value-oriented issues that are related to combat and operations but not covered in present training. Marines also face conceptual and value-oriented issues not directly related to combat and operations that nevertheless bear on them. These too ought to be education and training topics. Take, for example, two Marines who participated in the Resilience Research Project and who had very different



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conceptions of how to assess their own performance in combat.

One Marine, held in high regard by his peers and superiors, was *for years* ashamed of his actions after an incident in Iraq based on what appears to have been an unrealistic expectation about his own performance. He thought he ought to have been fully capable of looking after his wounded Marines after an improvised explosive device hit his convoy and he was concussed. Where does this kind of idealism come from? One possible source is the “lesson” of Sgt Wright. It seems to go something like this: “If a guy can be blown up and suffer arterial bleeding and the loss of his hands and still act, what was my problem?”

Now for a more realistic approach to self-assessment taken by a second Marine:

I mean, you always look back and you're like, did I need to do that, or, you know, I made decisions that have resulted in Marines dying . . . but you go back and you look, and you've got to think, okay, I can Monday-morning quarterback it all I want, but in that time and place, did I make a valid decision? You know what? Yeah. If I had known a little bit more, maybe I wouldn't have. But that's what I knew at the time. And that's what I went off. And sometimes you look again, and you're like, that was dumb. I will not do that again.<sup>6</sup>

This Marine might harbor some regrets, but he is not ashamed. Stress that he generates in reviewing his past actions is less likely to become distress, as he is not reviewing his past actions in order to continuously relive his sense that he failed his Marines; rather, he reviews them in order to adjust his concepts for the future. In accepting a realistic conception of self-assessment, he refuses to adopt an idealistic approach that can lead to a focus on dwelling in the past rather than being ready for the future.

The first Marine could *have been* invited to review his actions with a realistic conception of concussions, maybe using the example of professional football players. Here is one place where it is legitimate to reference biophysiology as a basis for failing to act: Certain

kinds of damage to certain parts of us can prevent our acting in the ways we otherwise prefer to act. As it turns out, this first Marine adjusted his self-perception from shameful to acceptable after learning that the Marine infantry officer leading the quick reaction force responding to the improvised explosive device attack thought his actions were “what they should have been.” This fact highlights the idea that stress and resilience are as social as they are individual.

The preceding paragraphs lay out some of the content for a Marine-focused rather than brain-focused resilience training effort, which at present is a missed opportunity. Turning to what Marines actually do and say in combat, in operations, and, just as importantly, beyond those contexts can change this situation. Real-life issues Marines face can be the basis of “leadership development exercises” for Marines to work through in small groups. These exercises can be constructed just like tactical decision games, but with the goal being to introduce Marines to concepts and values they may have never encountered, used, or pursued. The exercises can be targeted by MOS, rank, situation, or just about anything else that is relevant according to Marines themselves. A facilitator's guide to discussing the complexities of these scenarios could be produced from what Marines, units, and families already do. Examples of these scenarios were produced as part of the recommendations offered in the Resilience Research Project's final report.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, this kind of education and training effort cannot be “measured” in any of the typical or preferred bureaucratic ways. An insight sometimes attributed to the physicist Albert Einstein is appropriate here: Some things that can be counted do not count, and some things that cannot be counted do count. Most of what is really important about Marines and being a Marine is in the latter category.

The transformation of civilians into Marines demonstrates not only that the Corps already practices the kind of education and training I am referring to in this article, but that it works. No Marine Corps general I know of

requires that new Marines have their blood sampled or their brains scanned in order to determine whether or not they are looking at the genuine, capable article. Marines are not born, but are instead invited to adopt a set of powerful concepts and values that mark them as Marines. The opportunity to approach stress and resilience in the same powerful way awaits.

*>Author's Note: The opinions and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Marine Corps, any other governmental agency, or Professional Solutions, LLC.*

#### Notes

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