Esprit de Corps

Morale and Force Preservation
by CAPT Dan Stallard, CHC, USN

*E*sprit de corps means the "spirit of the body" and has long captured our Marine Corps' sense of camaraderie on and off the battlefield. *Esprit de corps* is the essence of individual and group morale and an essential element of warfighting. Mid-19th century French war theorist Col Ardant du Picq noted,

> The art of war is subjected to many modifications by industrial and scientific progress. But one thing does not change, the heart of man. In the last analysis, success in battle is a matter of morale.[1]

He went on to say, "The human heart … is then the starting point in all matters pertaining to war."[2]

The purpose of this article is to get at the heart of warfighting by defining and describing morale and its correlation to force preservation. Today, our military struggles with problems of destructive behavior, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, wreckless behavior, and suicide. Destructive behaviors negatively impact unit cohesion and warfighting readiness. This article proposes that high morale can be a protective (buffering) factor on and off the battlefield to ameliorate destructive behaviors. The focus of this article is on the destructive behavior of suicide.

Morale is not an end but a means to an end. Morale is a state of being and can fluctuate high and low in the best Marine or unit. Gaining a better understanding of the science of morale can improve individual and group well-being, resulting in a tougher, more resilient fighting force.

Morale: Etymology and Science

The English word morale is rooted in the Latin *moralis*[3] then Old French

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moral.[4] Morals and morale are directly related. Morals pertain to right and wrong behavior while morale pertains to the affective nature of morality, i.e., a right or wrong attitude. During the French Revolution, morale described the confidence of the military.[5]

The scientific study of morale has primarily focused on the military application. Studies during World Wars I and II analyzed what impact combat had on the psychology of service members' morale, but like much war-related research, the study of morale subsided over time. Current research on morale is lacking; on 15 July 2017, an academic search on EBSCO (Elton B. Stephens Company) for "morale" in peer-reviewed English journals revealed 2,347 articles; when "military" was added to the academic search, there were 61 articles, most of which were not current research.

In a seminal study, however, Britt, Adler, Bliese, and Moore[6] analyzed the moderating (buffering) effect of morale on PTSD symptoms in a group of 641 soldiers who returned from a fifteen-month deployment to Iraq in 2013. They viewed morale as a buffer against PTSD symptoms and suggested morale was a "psychological resource for soldiers;" thus, they hypothesized that higher morale would produce lower levels of PTSD symptoms even when exposed to high levels of combat. They measured morale, unit support, combat exposure, and PTSD symptoms at two intervals: four months after they returned from deployment then six

months later. The results of the study supported their hypothesis.

In 2017, Dyches, et al.,[7] studied the relationship between anger and aggression during combat and the moderating effect of perceived unit morale. These researchers used the 2013 Mental Health Advisory Team 9 data gathered in Afghanistan. They hypothesized

> that perceptions of unit morale would moderate the association between combat exposure and PTSD, such that associations between combat exposure and PTSD would be less evident at higher versus lower levels of unit morale [and] that perceptions of unit morale would moderate the indirect association of combat exposure with anger and aggression through PTSD.[8]

To test their hypotheses, they analyzed data from 592 service members on combat exposure, PTSD symptoms, depression, and unit morale; the results supported their hypotheses as well.

What is a moderating or buffering effect? A good illustration is the buffer assembly in a M16A2 that, when properly functioning, buffers the negative impact of recoil and keeps the weapon firing or ready to fire. How? The compressed buffer spring absorbs most of the recoil, and when fully compressed, the spring expands to push the buffer and bolt forward back to a ready firing position or continuing the cyclic rate of fire. The weapon cannot fire without the buffer assembly. Positive psychological factors such as morale function like the buffer assembly to absorb some of the effect of combat exposure; these protective factors help the warrior stay in the fight, and when he returns home from war, they help him reintegrate and positively adjust.

The social science of positive psychology is keenly interested in morale and is uniquely positioned to study the various

psychological buffering components as explained by Peterson, Park, and Sweeney, who stated "morale is a cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance toward the goals and tasks of a group."[9] They described fifteen components of morale such as confidence, enthusiasm, optimism, resilience, leadership, social cohesion, humor, and moral rightness.[10] These psychological components of morale are not exhaustive; they are observable, measurable, repeatable, and can be strengthened, resulting in higher morale.

Morale: A Warfighting Factor

MCDP 1, Warfighting, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1996), informs us that to understand the nature of war, we must take into consideration the importance of the intangible mental and psychological factors of war such as morals and morale. High morals and morale can help win battles and wars. Michael Handel, in *Masters in War: Classic Strategic Thought,* captured this perfectly when quoting World War II British Field Marshal Wavell on the four most important lessons of war:

> The final deciding factor of all engagements, battles, and wars is the morale of the opposing forces. Better weapons, better food, and superiority of numbers will influence morale, but it is the sheer determination to win, by whomever or whatever inspired, that counts in the end. Fine feathers may make fine birds, but fine battleships do not necessarily make fine sailors or we could never have dominated the Mediterranean against the greatly superior Italian fleet. Study men and their morale always.[11]

Morale: A Commander's Reflection on the Battle for Hue

LtGen Ron Christmas, USMC(Ret), an infantry company commander in the Battle for Hue during the infamous Tet Offensive of 1968 stated,

> The importance of individual and unit morale should never be underestimated; in the most difficult battles or smaller fire fights, it is often the factor that turns what appears to be impending failure to complete success. During the battle to retake the City of Hue that had fallen to North

Vietnamese Army forces on January 31, 1968, the responding Marines of the Second Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, were greatly outnumbered and would be so throughout the resulting vicious street fight. However, they would prevail, in part, because their commanders and small unit leaders understood the importance of maintaining morale, recognized when it was waning, and took action, often unconventional, to regain it.

When asked, "How did you sense the level of morale of the Marines you lead?" Gen Christmas commented,

> First, you must know them. You must know the capabilities and limitations of your Marines individually and as a unit. Equally important is how they operate as a team. You get to know them by 'walking your defensive lines.' A conversation in a defensive position over a hot cup of C-ration coffee (MRE today) helps a commander learn much about their Marines. Patrolling with one of the units allows a commander to evaluate unit strengths and weaknesses. Equally, the commander's presence, when either walking the lines in the defense or leading from the best vantage point in the offense, reassures the Marines of the unit of the commander's competence and caring.

When then asked, "How do you increase morale during combat?" Christmas replied,

> Marines expect six traits in their leaders. First, they expect them to know their job. They expect **Competence**. They expect to be led professionally and by commanders who know their own limitations and capabilities, never allowing any personal weaknesses to adversely impact their Marines. Second, they expect **Candor**. Marines expect their commanders to be totally honest with them to tell it like it is. They want to know the 'why' and will fight better when they do. A unit that demands and practices total honesty throughout is always a strong and successful one.
>
> Marines expect their commanders to have **Courage**, both physical and moral. They expect their leaders to lead from the front when that is required, but never foolishly. They want their

commander[s] to position themselves where to best control the battle. They know that maintaining moral courage is too often the hardest type of courage to possess and practice. Moral courage is doing what is correct no matter the pressure to do what we know is wrong. The pressure to take a shortcut, to cheat, is powerful; that is why moral courage is sometimes tougher to maintain when it seems that others are not practicing it. Commanders must be **Compassionate**. Good commanders honestly care about their Marines and families, not for show but for real. Caring does not threaten discipline of an individual or unit; in fact, discipline is an important element of caring. A commander disciplines a Marine or a unit because they care and wants them to understand their error and improve their performance. A disciplined unit is a successful one on the battlefield. Also, Marines expect their commanders to be **Consistent**. If Marines know what is expected of them and those expectations do not continually change on the commander's whim, the unit will perform consistently well. Finally, Marines expect **Commitment**.

Gen Christmas continued by stating that commitment is defined best by the Marine Corps motto, "Semper Fidelis, Always Faithful—being always faithful to your God, your family, your country and to your Corps; but, most especially, to your fellow Marine."

To illustrate his point that commanders must always find ways to keep morale from waning, sometimes in unique ways, the General shared how during the battle to recapture the city of Hue, the battalion chaplain played a key role in lifting the spirits of the combatants. He noted that on the day that Hotel Company seized the heavily defended Thua Thien Province Capitol Building after an all-day fire fight and brutal assault, then-Capt Christmas had just established his command post on the second floor of the capitol building from which he had easy access to his defending platoons. As he was checking defensive fire plans, the battalion chaplain entered the room. The chaplain had been everywhere during the battle, assessing morale and bringing comfort to those in need. The chaplain
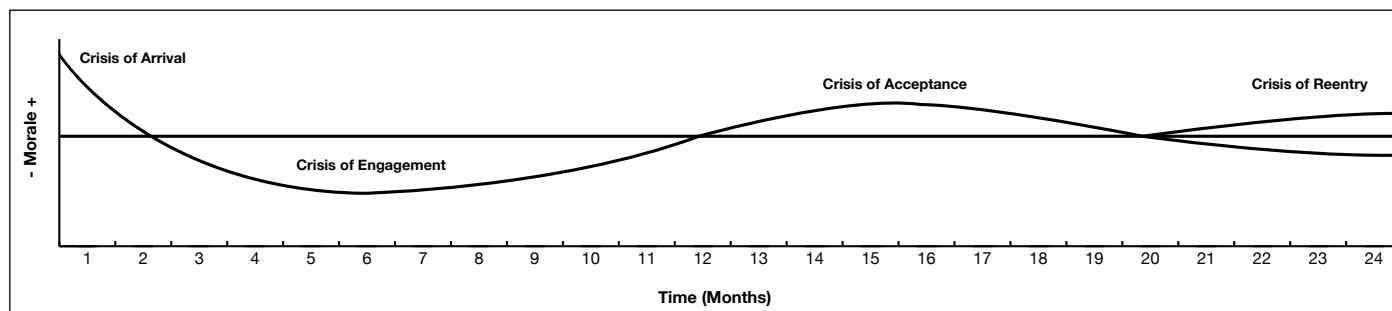
Figure 1. Menninger's Morale Curve.

was Catholic; Capt Christmas was Protestant. That made no difference except to cause some friendly banter between them. The Father had come to the command post to request permission to visit each of the Marines manning defensive positions so that he could administer the sacrament to those of the Catholic faith. The Captain chided him: "What about my Protestant boys?" The quick reply was: "You know my sacrament always includes a blessing for each Marine who wants it!" Capt Christmas knew that it did and how much the chaplain's sacrament and blessing meant to the men. According to Gen Christmas, "It's the 'little things' that a commander does that seem to always have the greatest impact on maintaining morale in combat."

Morale: The Problem of Suicide

Suicide is a pervasive and complex problem. According to the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, over 40,000 people commit suicide in the United States each year, roughly 13 per 100,000 at a cost of over $50 billion per year.[12] In the past, military suicide rates have been lower than the general public, and military service was viewed as a protective factor against suicide; however, over the past several years, suicide rates in the military have increased. According to the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO), from calendar year 2012 through 2016, the Marine Corps averaged 40.8 suicides per year; though the rate appears to be trending downward, the problem is still significant.[13]

Why do service members kill themselves? What role does morale have in suicide-related behaviors? Can higher morale prevent suicide? The reasons that

people kill themselves vary across the lifespan; however, there are common suicide risk factors among military service members, such as a family history of suicide, failed or broken relationships, mental health problems, prior suicide-related behavior and treatment, and poor social and coping skills. The DSPO noted that past research studied two potential suicide risk factors—deployment and combat exposure—but recent research suggests "there may not be a direct association between suicide and deployment or combat exposure."[14] However, they noted, "Certain types of combat exposure may be associated with a greater sense of acquired capability for self-harm, and could be a risk factor."[15]

... over the past several years, suicide rates in the military have increased.

Furthermore, the DSPO reported that periods of transition and social disruption can create a sense of thwarted belongingness, thus increasing the risk.[16] Also, the DSPO noted, "Research on combat exposure shows that community support and connectedness, while in theater, can be a protective factor against suicide."[17] This suggests that social support, unit cohesion, and high morale in combat and at home are protective factors for preventing suicide. Three theories that provide us a better understanding of the relationship between morale and suicide are Menninger's Morale Curve, Joiner's

Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide, and Shneidman's Suicidal Cubelet.

Menninger's Morale Curve

Walter Menninger, in "Adaption and Morale: Predictable Responses to Life Change,"[18] identified that how individuals cope with change can be a mental health indicator. Working with Peace Corps volunteers, he developed the morale curve. The curve is based on interviews with the volunteers before, during, and after their 24 months of service which revealed "common reaction patterns and predictable periods of psychological crisis" (see Figure 1). The four periods of crisis have correlated and often conflicting emotions and behaviors: 1) crisis of arrival: anxiety, high motivation, apprehension, and enthusiasm; 2) crisis of engagement: depression, realization of losses, limited outlets, frustration; 3) crisis of acceptance: anger, criticism, activism, reassessment; and 4) crisis of re-entry: satisfaction at completion, concern about the future, anxiety, depression.[19]

How individuals adapt to change and cope with these periods of crisis or transition determines their level of morale, sense of belongingness, and well-being. Menninger made the following conclusions regarding improving morale: 1) "increased knowledge improves the human capacity to interpret and appraise events, and contributes to a sense of mastery that diminishes the anxiety provoked by the new situation;" 2) "help[ing] individuals put the situation in proper perspective … reduce[s] the sense of isolation and helplessness;" and 3) implementing "support programs … foster[s] opportunities for individuals to be in control of their lives."[20]

Joiner's Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide

Thomas Joiner's theory of suicide has provided empirical insight into why people kill themselves. The theory has three main elements: 1) the psychological state of perceived burdensomeness; 2) a sense of low belongingness or social alienation; and the most critical factor, 3) the acquired ability for lethal self-injury.[21]

> Perceived burdensomeness is the view that one's existence burdens family, friends, and/or society … A low sense of belongingness is the experience that one is alienated from others, not an integral part of a family, circle of friends, or other valued group.[22]

Joiner noted the first two factors may not create enough "desire" to attempt suicide; it is the third factor, the acquired ability for lethal self-injury, that creates enough pain that a person fights against one's own sense of survival and self-preservation.[23]

Shneidman's Suicidal Cubelet

Edwin Shneidman, in his capstone work, *The Suicidal Mind*,[24] identified ten commonalities in suicide along with how to treat persons who are suicidal. In addition, he developed the practical Suicidal Cubelet[25] (see Figure 2), which depicts a cube with three scales from one to five to assess individual suicide ideation: 1) Perturbation (anger and agitation, which consist of mental constriction and a strong inclination for drastic action), 2) Pain (psychache), and 3) Press (distress and the cause of psychache). When an individual reaches an intolerable level of perturbation, pain, and press, suicide can occur.

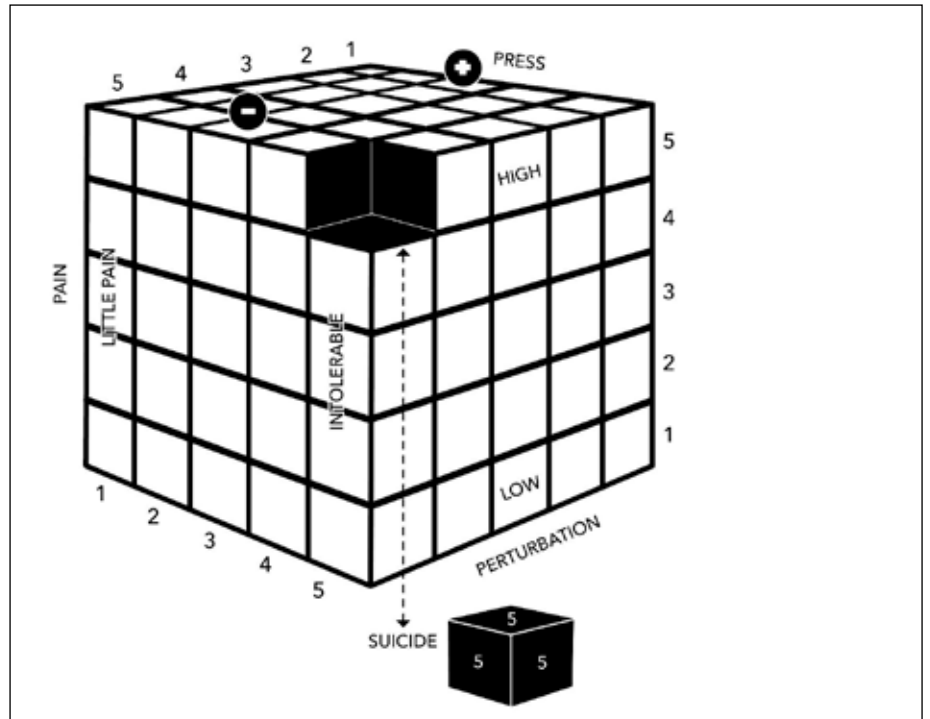## Morale: Preventing Suicide

These three constructs can help us

Figure 2. Schneidman's Suicidal Cubelet.

understand and prevent suicide. Figures 3 and 4[26] are graphs of data collected by the Marine Corps from 2001 to 2012 indicating that suicide-related behaviors are highest between a service member's second and seventh month of joining a unit. Based on Menninger's Morale Curve, this is the lowest point of morale during the *crisis of engagement*, thus preventing these behaviors requires intentional engagement to help Marines adapt to this transition, cope with the stress of military life, discover a sense of belongingness, and find meaning and purpose in life and the mission.

Morale: Preserving the Force

The Marine Corps is critically concerned about preserving the force. Preserving the force must be intentional, which is evident by the establishment of the G-10 Force Preservation Directorate in November 2016 and the continued development of the Force Preservation Counsel Policy and Marine Intercept Program.

Morale is an essential warfighting factor. High morale can be a psychological protective factor that helps to decrease destructive behaviors and increase individual and unit morale, thus strengthening warfighting readiness. The following are recommendations for increasing morale: 1) develop character strengths and virtues using VIA survey and character strength interventions;[27] 2) encourage service and family members to participate in the Navy Chaplain Corps' CREDO (Chaplains Religious Enrichment Development Operation)
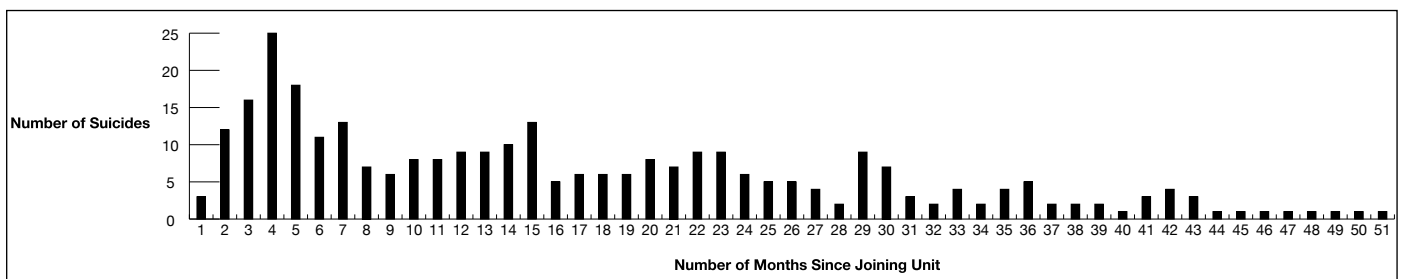

Figure 3. Marine Corps active duty suicides relative to months since joining unit CY2001-July 2012.
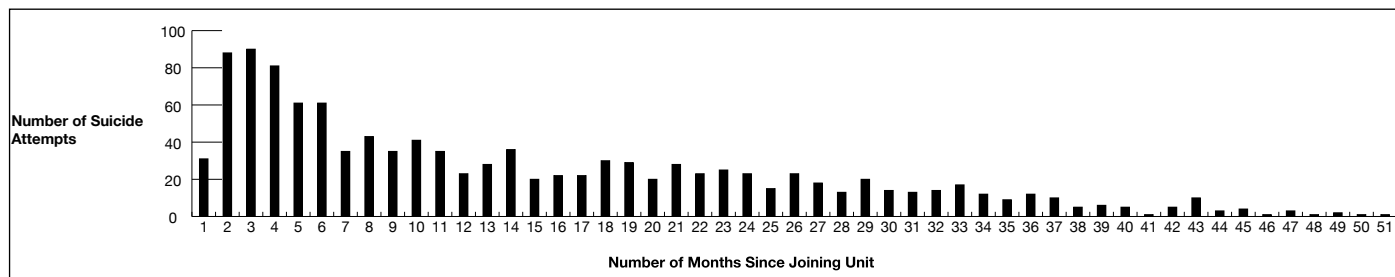
Figure 4. Marine Corps active duty suicide attempts relative to months since joining unit CY 2001-July 2012.

programs, e.g., marriage enrichment retreats, single service members' personal growth retreats, resiliency workshops, and destructive behavior prevention briefs; 3) get service members and units involved in community service; 4) improve the sponsorship program; 5) evaluate service members' morale throughout their time in a unit by using tools like MCFIT (Marine Corps Fitness Improvement Tool) and face-to-face conversations; 6) use intentional mentorship and leadership to know your Marines and families; 7) equip service and family members with life skills like anger management and coping; 8) educate them in effective decision making, especially to seek help when needed and about the availability of mental health resources; and 9) host recreational and community building activities for service members and families.

Preserving the force is essential for effective warfighting. The world is chaotic, and war is always looming; the Marine Corps must be ready 24/7 to respond to our Nation's 911 call: "Send in the Marines."

Notes

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3. *Moralis*, retrieved on 15 July 2017 from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu.

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6. T. Britt, A. Adler, P. Bliese, and D. Moore, "Morale as a Moderator of the Combat Exposure-PTSD Symptom Relationship," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, (2013).

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9. "Group Well-Being: Morale from a Positive Psychology Perspective."

10. Ibid.

11. M. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought,* (London: Frank Cass Publishing, 2001).

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13. Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report, Calendar Year 2016, 4th Quarter Defense Suicide Prevention Office Report, (Washington, DC: 2016), available at http://www.dspo.mil.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

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27. R. Niemiec, *Character Strengths Interventions.* (Boston, MA: Hogrefe Publishing, 2017).

>*Author's Note: Chaplain Stallard personally thanks LtGen Ron Christmas, USMC (Ret), for his contribution to this article and his words of wisdom in "Morale: A Commander's Reflection on the Battle for Hue." Then-LtCol Christmas was Pvt Stallard's 1st Recruit Battalion Commander, Parris Island, from 20 April to 18 July 1980.*

>>*The views expressed in this article are of the author and not the USG, USN, or USMC.*

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