

FEATURE

True Warrior Ethos – The Creed of Today's American Warrior

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In recent articles published on the topic, the term warrior, and the idea of warrior ethos, have drawn much undeserved criticism. In the April 2020 piece, *On the Toxicity of the Warrior Ethos*, Ryan Noordally uses an inaccurate and prejudicial 37-year-old definition of warrior from John Keegan when stating that a warrior is, “a professional fighter trained since childhood whose class or caste holds power. Warriors feel they own the exclusive right to apply violence or bear arms.” (Noordally, 2020). Noordally justifies his position by taking a swipe at Zach Snyder’s 2006 film *300*. After defining warriors as amoral rapists, murders, slave holders, and oppressors, he explains why the modern military should not aspire to be warriors at all. His argument is fundamentally flawed, and this article will examine the reasons why.

First of all, alarmists can settle down. The U.S. military is not seeking to reinstate 5th Century B.C. cultural practices of ancient Greece. We are not looking to start throwing ugly babies off cliffs for the good of society and, in fact, the Air Force has one of the most active anti-sexual assault education and training campaigns in the country. Secondly, the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines ‘warrior’ as *a person who fights in a battle or war* (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionaries, n.d.) and Merriam-Webster defines ‘warrior’ as *a person engaged or experienced in warfare* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). The portion of 300 we would focus on is the scene where Leonidas asks the Athenian ‘soldiers’ their professions. They answer potter, sculptor, and blacksmith. All 300 of the Spartans are professional soldiers. Going back to Merriam-Webster, the definition of soldier is *one engaged in military service; a skilled warrior* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a).

The U. S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) defines warrior ethos as “the embodiment of the warrior spirit; tough mindedness, tireless motivation, an unceasing vigilance, a willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the country, if necessary, and a commitment to be the world’s premier air, space and cyberspace force.” (U.S. Dept of the Air Force, 2019, p. 3). The proficiencies we focus on as a warrior in the USAF negate all the deficiencies that Noordally and his contemporaries espouse on warrior culture in the modern day. Like Keegan, we want our Airmen and cadets to be highly trained professional fighters. In sharp contrast to Keegan and Sparta, the term warrior does

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not solely define American military members. USAFA incorporates warrior ethos as part of a four-pillared approach to officer development and demonstrating warrior ethos as Airmen and Citizens (WEAC) is one of the institutional outcomes (The United States Air Force Academy, 2014). Warrior Ethos is a co-equal with being professional/disciplined military members, leaders of character, and servants of the nation sworn to defend the constitution (The United States Air Force Academy, 2013, p. 5) and is broken down into four major areas that USAFA graduates are expected to master:

- Analyze and value the profession of arms,
- Demonstrate integrity as related to moral courage,
- Demonstrate service before self as related to physical courage, and
- Demonstrate excellence in all we do as related to discipline.

A closer look into each of these areas reveals some of the specific characteristics that fortify a robust sense of warrior ethos and personify true warriors throughout the Air Force, the U.S. military, and beyond.

Analyze and Value the Profession of Arms

The WEAC Outcome states that “USAFA Graduates Will be Able to: Analyze and Value the Profession of Arms” and be proficient in the ability to “Analyze the military profession of arms by a critical examination of the nature of war through multiple perspectives” (WEAC Outcome Team, 2020, p. 1). According to Bloom’s cognitive taxonomy, “Analyze involves breaking material into its constituent parts and determining how the parts are related to each another and to an overall structure.” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 79). According to Krathwohl’s affective taxonomy, to value something means to “accept, prefer, or commit one’s self to an object or behavior because of its

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perceived worth or value. To appreciate.” (AFMAN 36-2236, 2003, p. 134).

So really what we are saying, is that by the time a cadet graduates and is commissioned as an officer, they can deconstruct the nature of war from multiple perspectives, determine how those parts relate to one another, and appreciate how doing so informs acting in the context of an officer of character. With this in mind, USAFA engages cadets through multiple education, training, and other experiences (ETEs) to develop this competence by assessing, challenging, and supporting them on achieving this goal. For example, all cadets attend History 100, Military and Strategic Studies 251, and Commissioning Education 200 educational courses, a Basic Training course, and participate in the Academy’s annual National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) experience which is themed around the WEAC Outcome every four years.

By engaging cadets with these ETEs, USAFA lays a foundation and grounds them with an orientation about how to think in the context of the profession of arms. Doing so prepares them to have the necessary cognitive and motivational capacity which enables them to then demonstrate and employ behavior aligned with being a warrior in the United States Air or Space forces. This ability aligns with the institutional definition of a leader of character, in that to live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance (CCLD, 2011), one must embody the ethos of a warrior. For instance, an Airman/Guardian who is responsible for

the employment of weapons of mass destruction must fundamentally understand and appreciate not only how to effectively employ these weapons, but also be cognizant of the impact and cascading effect doing so will have on the world. This is the essence of elevating performance. In addition, this same person must have the ability to behave and interact in such a manner with their fellow Airmen/Guardians so as engender trust with them by living honorably, and as teammates supporting them so as to lift them to their best possible self. This cannot happen without first, being grounded in the concepts of the profession of arms, and second, without being motivated toward valuing their role in this context.

This year’s NCLS which is designed around the WEAC theme, serves to develop cadets, faculty/staff, and others in a manner that exposes and engages them with speakers who have been intentionally selected because of their expertise related to this theme. These speakers will present their perspective in the context of the profession of arms to enlighten our understanding of it. However, this alone is not sufficient, so we challenge those who participate in NCLS to take your experience to the next level. As you hear these perspectives, we encourage you to reflect on the extent to which you are committed to the Profession of Arms. Do you appreciate the value and worth of developing habits of thought and action consistent with the warrior ethos? In what aspect of this leader of character competence can you improve? As you lead in the future, how will you act to develop those

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around you to improve their competence? For those not participating in NCLS, these are still great questions to ponder for your development. True warriors develop their knowledge and understanding in the art AND science of the Profession of Arms.

Demonstrate Integrity as Related to Moral Courage

The term warrior can be defined in a variety of ways and it evokes a wide range of character traits and images, some of which may be less than admirable. It is therefore imperative we differentiate Noordally's depiction of warriors as "murderers, rapists, and slave owners" (Noordally, 2020) from the warrior ethos cultivated at USAFA, and infused with the characteristic of moral courage. Moral courage is the ability to act and do the right thing even in the face of adversity. The moral courage of the true warrior is best illustrated within the context of historical episodes. For example, the characters within the infamous Sand Creek Massacre provide a clear contrast between the 'toxic' warrior mentality of a United States Colonel and a morally courageous Captain. Though not contemporary, the story hits geographically close to home for USAFA. As indicated by its name, the massacre took place near Big Sandy Creek, which originates in USAFA's home county, El Paso.

The massacre took place at a time of great tension between the settlers and indigenous people in Colorado. In the year of 1864 alone, 32 Indian attacks resulted in the death of 96 settlers. The sentiment of many settlers was captured in the Colorado governor authorizing "all citizens of Colorado... to go in pursuit of all hostile Indians ... to kill and destroy, as enemies of the country." (S. Rep. 2, 38th Cong., 1865, p. 47). The Cheyenne and Arapahoe people, led by chief Black Kettle, sought a peace treaty with the Governor who delegated negotiations to Col Chivington, and who is infamously quoted as saying, "Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians! ... Kill and scalp all, big and little; nits make lice." (Brown, 2001, p. 86-87). In the

midst of these negotiations, the Cheyenne and Arapahoe people willingly disarmed. Col Chivington and his 1st Colorado Cavalry then made an unannounced visit to Black Kettle's relocated encampment at Sand Creek. His men proceeded to surround the village, populated primarily by the elderly, women, and children. Col Chivington ordered an attack in spite of Black Kettle's attempt to forestall it by flying a U.S. flag with a white flag under it. Chivington's men proceeded to slaughter between 100-250 villagers, including infants. An officer friendly to Chivington later recounted:

"There was one little child, probably three years old, just big enough to walk through the sand. The Indians had gone ahead, and this little child was behind following after them. The little fellow was perfectly naked, traveling on the sand. I saw one man get off his horse, a distance of about seventy-five yards, and draw his rifle and fire—he missed the child, another man came up and said, 'Let me try the son of a bitch; I can hit him.' He got down off his horse, kneeled down and fired at the little child, but missed him. A third man came up and made a similar remark, and fired, and the little fellow dropped." (Jackson, 1994, p. 345).

However, not all of Chivington's men were complicit in the atrocity. Capt Silas Soule refused to obey and told his men to hold fire. Lt Cramer and his men followed suit. Capt Silas Soule defined the distinction between moral courage and cowardice when he later stated, "I refused to fire, and swore that none but a coward would." (Frazier, 2000). Avoiding the wrath of Col Chivington for their disobedience, Capt Soule, Lt Cramer and their men departed back to Denver separately. Col Chivington and his followers returned later, parading through Denver with the 'trophy' of mutilated body parts of the slain. Chivington boasted of killing 500 Indian warriors and was initially heralded as a hero in the Rocky Mountain News. His 'great victory' would seemingly further his ambitions

for military promotion and public office. The Colonel's crimes and lies, however would soon catch up to him. Witnesses soon came forward, including Capt Soule, who formally testified in court against Chivington in spite of death threats. Tragically, the threats materialized in several attempts at his life until, 80 days after his testimony, one was successful. But his sacrifice was not in vain. Based largely on Silas' testimony, the investigation panel ultimately made the following declaration concerning Chivington:

"Wearing the uniform of the United States... he deliberately planned and executed a foul and dastardly massacre which would have disgraced the veriest savage among those who were the victims of his cruelty. Having full knowledge of their friendly character, having himself been instrumental to some extent in placing them in their position of fancied security, he took advantage of their in-apprehension and defenseless condition to gratify the worst passions that ever cursed the heart of man. Whatever influence this may have had upon Colonel Chivington, the truth is that he surprised and murdered, in cold blood, the unsuspecting men, women, and children on Sand creek, who had every reason to believe they were under the protection of the United States authorities, and then returned to Denver and boasted of the brave deed he and the men under his command had performed." (S. Rep. 2, 38th Cong., 1865, p. 47).

Chivington and Soule's names are both inextricably connected to this infamous event, but their legacies could not be more different. Chivington escaped from Colorado but could not escape from his past as he moved from one failed business or political office attempt to another. On the contrary, Soule (who was rightly regarded as a hero in his own time and buried with full military honors) is still widely admired and celebrated to this day. Native Americans pay tribute to him on an annual basis and decorate his grave during

anniversary events connected to the massacre. Soule's actions both during and after the tragedy epitomize moral courage as distinguished from the complacency that so frequently defines moral cowardice.

Though Soule and Chivington were both warriors, Chivington embodied all of the most destructive and horrifying characteristics that we associate with the term. Conversely, Soule possessed the warrior ethos that we strive to cultivate in cadets: an ethos defined by the courage to do what is morally right, regardless of the consequences. Notably, Soule's untimely and unjust death reinforce the notion that moral courage is not always rewarded, and that doing the right thing is no guarantee of a long, happy, and fulfilling life. That is precisely the point, however: moral courage is based around the notion of doing the right thing because it is right, not because of any reward.

Throughout history, there have been many examples of military leaders like Col Chivington who embraced a 'toxic' warrior mentality, a mentality based around the concept of destroying one's enemies without any concern for human dignity. Capt Soule, in contrast, refused to 'tolerate among us anyone who does' this. This is precisely why the USAFA mission is not simply to train great military leaders, but to inspire officers of character. Leaders of character, like Capt Soule, acknowledge the intrinsic human dignity of others and work to uphold that dignity, even at great personal cost.

El Paso County is the origin point of Big Sandy Creek; it is likewise the origin point for the military careers of USAFA's cadets. As their careers progress downstream toward officership in military campaigns, their path must divert from that of Col Chivington's, and toward that of Capt Soule's. The soul, and indeed, the very fate of our nation and world depends upon it. This is why moral courage is fundamentally distinctive to the warrior ethos we cultivate and is embodied by every true warrior.

Demonstrate Service Before Self as Related to Physical Courage

Physical courage often conjures up thoughts of Hollywood depictions of battlefield heroics or the protagonist struggling to win the final fight scene in the latest action film. The hero is never conflicted, never afraid, and is always confident of victory. While these familiar images are lucrative for the entertainment industry, they do not fully capture the tenant of physical courage within the context of the Academy's Warrior Ethos as Airmen and Citizens Outcome. "The ability to put the mission and others above one's self, even at an increased personal risk or risk of failure" (USAFA Outcomes, 2020) does not have the catchy ring of a blockbuster movie quote. Still, it does frame the way physical courage is needed to meet the Air and Space Force missions. Chief Master Sergeant Thomas Chase, a recipient of two Silver Stars for his heroism while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, explains it by saying,

"Physical Courage in its simplest form is bravery in the face of anything physical you do. It can be a hardship or a threat. You can tie that directly to moral courage as well. It is the ability to act in the face of opposition correctly. But it still takes physical attributes to meet that demand. There are many examples of physical courage out there. But I think that the risk of discomfort, injury, pain, or even death is part of any of these actions. It can come in many forms, a firefighter running in a burning building or facing your adversary on the battlefield." (T. Case, personal communication, December 11, 2020)

There is also a real-world cost for its lack of development in those who volunteer to serve. According to Case:

"My second Silver Star was awarded on an objective with significant contact with the enemy who held the high ground. The primary air-to-ground

player was an AC-130 Gunship, and I was not the most forward controller on the mountainside. He was unresponsive, so I ran up the hill and found him curled up in a ball. His lack of courage severely disrupted our kill chain. He was not cut out for our mission because he lacked physical courage." (T. Case, personal communication, December 11, 2020)

According to the 2018 National Defense Strategy, "The Department of Defense is tasked to train and equip to meet emerging threats of peer and near-peer adversaries" (National Defense Strategy, 2018). A specific line of effort within this is improving lethality. These goals are reached by developing individual combatants who are able and willing to exercise physical courage while executing their mission against similarly trained and equipped adversaries.

While all three mission elements at USAFA (Cadet Wing, Dean of Faculty, and Athletic Department) contribute to physical courage, we will focus on two of the Athletic Department's contributions. Within the Athletic Department, two core courses required for all cadets cultivate a mindset and involve demonstrations of physical courage. The Athletic Department is uniquely able to foster this development because learning motor skills and movement patterns are necessary for physical education classes and the ability to use those skills during stressful, physically challenging times is essential for Air Force mission accomplishment. USAFA helps lay the foundation for physical courage development through the combative and aquatics curriculum by teaching skills and then requiring cadets to demonstrate them in a stressful situation.

Combatives – The Combatives courses at USAFA teach cadets how to engage an opponent in hand-to-hand combat situations. In addition to developing the motor skills necessary, cadets learn the combatives mindset which cultivates a willingness to act, refusal to

fail, and unrelenting aggressiveness which are essential in achieving the desired mission end state. As the course progresses, cadets develop a physically courageous mindset when placed in physically and psychologically challenging situations. These courses place cadets in a controlled environment where physical courage is needed to fight their opponent. This experience helps develop grit and a willingness to close with the enemy, preparing them to meet possible future operational needs. Instructors assess a cadet's willingness to engage, follow the Rules of Engagement (ROEs) while correctly using the course's techniques. Ultimately, Combatives develops an individual's ability to problem solve under stress, forging a warrior that is equipped to thrive under adverse conditions.

Aquatics – The water survival course teaches personal water survival skills while providing an experience to help develop leadership attributes, including self-confidence, emotional control, persistence, courage, and discipline. The course's two capstone events are a 5-meter egress scenario and a survival scenario initiated with a tower jump. The course curriculum is intentionally designed to foster USAFA cadet's ability to navigate heights safely, manage fear, and follow lawful orders in a controlled yet stressful training environment. Cadets who complete the core combatives and aquatics curriculum have demonstrated the necessary skills and desired outcome of physical courage for future AF officers, many of which are being prepared to serve in operational, combat aviation, or related roles.

The attributes of physical courage are not something that are issued upon graduation from a military academy or suddenly appear after technical training for operational jobs. They are developed and fostered throughout an individual's life. Building on what is already in place, and sometimes laying the initial foundation, USAFA has programs that intentionally develop physical courage. It begins with basic training and development continues through the four-year

immersive commissioning education program at USAFA and develops the necessary tenant of true Warrior Ethos for all Air and Space Force officers.

Demonstrate Excellence in All We Do as Related to Discipline

This final area addresses how Airmen and the Air Force will engage the inevitable challenges posed by competitors and adversaries striving to achieve military dominance and control. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'excellence' as "the state or fact of excelling; the possession chiefly of good qualities in an eminent or unusual degree; surpassing merit, skill, virtue, worth, etc.; dignity, eminence." (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Excellence in all we do mandates that Airmen "strive for continual improvement in self and service in order to propel the Air Force further and to achieve greater accomplishment and performance for themselves and their community." (United States Air Force, 2021).

This principle of continual improvement lies at the heart of being excellent in all we do and is reminiscent of the Aristotelian belief that excellent virtues are formed as one habitually demonstrates excellent actions (Durant, 1961). Every true warrior has the discipline to achieve and maintain excellence whether on the front lines, in garrison, or in their personal lives. The embodied warrior ethos driving them to achieve this excellence consists of several principles including an intrinsic desire to improve performance, exhibit grit and resilience in the face of adversity, and maintain effectiveness despite continual change. A deeper dive into each of these concepts illuminates the motivation and discipline underlying a true warrior's drive toward continual improvement and achievement of success.

Improving Performance. Mission accomplishment is always a top priority and with ever-changing conditions globally, the way in which missions are accomplished must adapt and change. To lead effectively in these dynamic settings, individuals

must also adapt and change, constantly improving their abilities both physically and mentally to meet the demands of continually shifting operational environments. Improvement can take many forms but involves analyzing what is necessary to complete the mission, determining what new knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed, and taking action to adapt.

On a personal level, this may involve changing a fitness regimen to better meet the physical demands of a specific position, adapting a habit of professional reading to improve key skills necessary to become a better leader, or engaging in deliberate reflection to gain new perspectives of the value of diversity and inclusion. On a professional level, improvement may include conducting critical conversations to address team dynamics and performance and then testing and adopting new tactics, techniques, and procedures to adapt to constantly changing demands. USAF doctrine states that Airmen must “continuously search for new and innovative ways to successfully accomplish the mission.” (United States Air Force, 2015, p. 3).

A deliberate and disciplined application of lessons learned through the process of personal and professional improvement provides the basis upon which to build innovative mindsets, practices, and operational procedures. While this serves to improve both the individual and organizational ability to support and conduct military operations, it also serves to strengthen the force as individuals and their families become better able to weather the inevitable storms. True warriors seek continual improvement and adapt to changing conditions.

Exhibiting Grit, Resilience, and Hardiness. At times, the journey and process of improvement is neither simple nor easy. Change can be hard, and as the number of people involved in the change increases, the harder it can become to affect the change. Dynamic operational environments now and into the future, are and will be replete with obstacles and

challenges that constantly test our ability to achieve mission objectives. Conditions can shift so fast that individuals and organizations cannot wait for official doctrine or guidance to be developed and must rely instead upon their individual and collective ability to adapt, overcome, and achieve victory. Our ability to withstand, recover, adapt, and grow despite the adversities and obstacles we face is a measure of our resiliency (U.S. Department of the Air Force, 2014) and grit determines our passion and perseverance to achieve long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016). In this sense, our grit helps us retain sight of our goals and resiliency gives us the power and ability to cope with, manage, and turn obstacles into steppingstones.

Understanding that adversity and change is inherent to the profession of arms lends credence to the idea that resiliency and grit should be constantly be developed and ideally habitualized through constant repetition. The time-tested results of military drills, rehearsals, and practice exercises demonstrates the value of repeated exposure to challenges. Moreover, ongoing research demonstrates the value of military service members, especially leaders, developing a hardiness of spirit during this process (Bartone, 2006). Grit and resiliency add strength to one’s own hardiness and together this can foster a resistance to accept failure despite the continually changing physical and mental hardships inherent to the contemporary military operational tempo. These warriors personify a gritty and resilient ethos as they refuse to accept failure despite the onslaught of hardships and discipline themselves to keep moving forward despite the challenges and obstacles in their path.

Maintaining Effectiveness Despite Change. While it is evident that warriors strive to improve performance and demonstrate grit and resilience, it is also clear that they must excel despite the challenges posed by ever-changing circumstances. It is often quipped that the only constant in the military is change, and this highlights an inherent element of life

in general, but especially for war fighters dedicated to the profession of arms. The operational environment whether in garrison, in the field, or deployed constantly transforms and shifts as the underlying conditions and circumstances continually change.

At the individual level, this may occur as people are called to serve in a variety of different positions requiring diverse skill sets and abilities. As conditions, processes, and requirements shift, individuals must manage this change and adjust to maintain operational effectiveness. Organizationally, teams must have the agility and flexibility to alter missions, 'effective immediately' if necessary, and remain dominant on the battlefield and in other military spaces. Changes at all levels of leadership are perpetually imminent and shifting work structures reflect a military able to withstand, adapt, and grow despite ongoing global adversities. Individually and organizationally, military culture also experiences ongoing shifts and adaptations.

In part, culture changes to include expanding diversity capitalizes on the full strength of its force and reflects an environment inclusive of various viewpoints, attributes, and strengths. Demonstrating warrior ethos as both an Airmen and a citizen includes challenging previously assumed norms and opening the mind, the team, and the organization to adopt diverse and innovative ways to address new challenges. This is essential to ensure the force remains effective, efficient, and dominant on the global front.

Today's warriors not only adapt to the rules of engagement but do so while remaining effective at eliminating the enemy within the confines of the laws of war. Demonstrating excellence in all we do means that as experts in the Profession of Arms, every warrior demonstrates the discipline to remain committed to constant improvement, developing and exhibiting grit and resilience, and learning to manage and thrive despite change. This vigilant dedication and discipline

to become exemplary leaders of character lies at the heart of every true warrior.

Conclusion

War has evolved significantly from the days of soldiers marching against each other during the Peloponnesian Wars. Physical stature, skill in hand-to-hand combat, and even sheer brute strength may have characterized the most superior of warriors then, but those times are far past, and the warriors of today are characterized by a much deeper level of knowledge, courage, and excellence. True warriors are academicians' adept in deconstructing and analyzing conflicts of the past to develop innovative techniques to maximize valuable resources while preserving life. They regard the profession of arms with honor and dignity, placing a high value on human life and giving the best of themselves to pursue peace and security rather than perpetual war.

True warriors demonstrate moral courage as they discern the fog and friction of war, respecting human life and limiting combat power to what is absolutely necessary within the confines of the laws of war. Similar to the warriors of the past, the warriors of the present demonstrate unmatched physical courage as they face adversity head on, risking their lives for others, and stubbornly surviving austere conditions while pushing their capabilities to achieve the mission. But these warriors also strive for continual improvement, exhibit dauntless grit and resiliency, and aptly adapt to change in their constant pursuit of excellence.

To the novice, the warriors of the past and the present may seem to have more in common than not. However, a closer look reveals what the trained eye and a scholar of the profession of arms already knows—that the warriors of today represent the best of all of us. These warriors have the compassion to care for and protect those in need, and the skill and undaunted resolve to close with and destroy the enemy when called

upon to do so. As our commitment to develop officers continues with events such as the National Character and Leadership Symposium, the warriors of the future will continue to adapt, grow, and learn continually answering the call to serve and protect their nation. These are the true warriors we have today and the ones we will rely upon tomorrow as we look to the future, and into space, to bring stability and peace to our nation and to the people of the world.

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