

FEATURE ARTICLES

Developing the Warrior Ethos

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ABSTRACT

An ethos is an essential element of the warrior culture that distinguishes the warrior from a murderer, killer, or vigilante. The ethos requires trusted members of the group to codify what are the standards of behavior for the group to live and, if necessary, die by. The first part of this article examines the process the U.S. Navy SEAL Teams took in 2005 to develop the SEAL Ethos for those already within the warrior culture. The second part of the article explores the development of a warrior ethos at the U.S. Naval Academy for those at the very beginning of their journey to join a warrior culture. While the first part provides the process for developing the code, the second part delivers an example of how that ethos is instilled.

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In late 2004, as combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were continuing to ramp up, eight members of a SEAL platoon conducting an exercise in Thailand tested positive for cocaine in a urinalysis drug test. Two SEAL platoons were subsequently sent home and 12 Naval Special Warfare (NSW) personnel faced charges ranging from distributing illegal drugs, conduct unbecoming, and impeding an investigation (Klay, 2018). What was even more astonishing about the incident is that only two members of the task unit of over 30 SEALs stepped forward before the urinalysis to say that the drug use was wrong and should not be tolerated. Their actions triggered the drug test for the rest of the task unit and the uncovering of a drug ring; it was clear that there was a sense of loyalty to individuals in the SEAL platoon that overshadowed loyalty to the organization. There was considerable shock within the leadership of the SEAL community that the mental toughness required and developed in Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training (BUD/S), the grueling six-month SEAL selection and assessment course, was lacking in holding other SEALs accountable for clear wrong-doing (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020). This incident along with a number of other incidents such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual misconduct, domestic violence, and physical altercations caused the removal of 33 SEALs from service in the community over a 15-month period. It was recognized by many in the community that these losses exceeded those lost in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan and something needed to be done.

In early 2005, the commanding officers of SEAL Team TWO, CDR Tim Szymanski, and SEAL Team ONE, CDR Bill Wilson, discussed with their Commodore, CAPT Jim O'Connell, the need for a code of conduct for the SEAL Teams to embrace (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020). The perception was that doing nothing would be

considerably more harmful to the community than doing something. In March of 2005, the Naval Special Warfare Command directed a combat-experienced junior officer and enlisted member from each SEAL Team to travel to a SEAL Training Compound on San Clemente Island, off the coast of California, for several days to draft the [SEAL Ethos](#) (NSWC, 2005). Members were chosen based on their experience in the teams as well as their ability to bring the ethos back to their commands with credibility and respect.

A warrior ethos is often a way to codify desired traits in a warrior culture such as those that will be described with the creation of the SEAL ethos. At a recent commencement ceremony for newly minted SEALs, Rear Admiral Wyman Howard described these attributes among others: integrity and grit, problem-solving and creativity, sacrifice and commitment (RADM W. Howard, personal communication, January, 2021). Desired traits codified in an ethos require reinforcement over time in training as well. The first part of this paper will describe the SEAL Ethos, how it was developed, its main components, and how it's used in the SEAL Teams. With a deeper understanding of a specific warrior ethos, the paper will go on to explore how the U.S. Naval Academy intentionally instills a warrior ethos within future Naval and Marine officers in the Brigade of Midshipmen both through required combatives training as well as with several pedagogical approaches in the classroom.

Developing the SEAL Ethos

At the small SEAL compound on San Clemente Island, approximately 50 SEALs from the SEAL Teams on both coasts of the United States were broken into small groups with dry erase boards to capture the community's beliefs and institutional values; the behavioral essence of "being a SEAL" (M. Martin, personal communication, December, 2020). Not only were current SEAL leaders

there, but retired SEALs from the Vietnam era were also included to bring a multi-generational perspective to the discussions. Together, the group had roughly 745 years of operational experience to draw from for the development of the ethos (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020). Based on the experience of the drug problem with the SEAL platoon in Thailand, in addition to several other conduct offences and DUIs, the intent was to draft an ethos that would guide SEALs' behavior not only when no one was looking, but also, and some would say more importantly, when everyone was looking (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020).

The importance of integrity often stressed is relative to personal decisions one makes when they are alone. However, in the SEAL Teams, operators are almost always with at least a swim buddy, if not an entire squad or platoon, and the bonds of members, of a SEAL platoon are known to be some of the strongest (Couch, 2003). This creates for some, difficulty in voicing dissent in ways that might contradict the group. Although there is a high level of trust, the more distinctive the group is, studies have shown that there exists a greater level of in-group favoritism (Voci, 2006). The SEAL Ethos was created to arm operators with behavioral expectations within their in-group and guide actions especially if that in-group goes astray.

The group at San Clemente Island developing the SEAL ethos were divided into six groups of officers and enlisted members from opposite coasts to mitigate pre-existing group-think. At the end of each day, the groups were reshuffled so that groups would not become wedded to certain concepts and ideas. Initially, the groups examined other ethos to get a sense of what a warrior ethos could embody. In this session, the groups studied the Ranger Creed of the U.S. Army Rangers, Allen Dulles's seven qualities of

an Intelligence Officer for the CIA, Viking Laws, and the U.S. Special Operations Command vision. The groups described what they believe America expected from its special operations force in terms of operational attributes such as assured success, agility and flexibility, surgical precision, special skills, and capabilities. They also described character attributes such as maturity and reliability, cultural and language expertise, innovation and problem solving, and most importantly, leadership. Groups then defined the community principles that all SEAL Team members would universally believe in, detailed in Table 1 (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020).

Table 1
Community Principles Discussed in 2005

Leadership	Fortitude
Integrity	Honor
Courage	Commitment
Innovation	Service
Loyalty	Excellence
Teamwork	Legacy
Humility	Professionalism

The groups followed this session by deliberating on the strengths and weaknesses of the community at the time in 2005, which would be easily recognized throughout the Teams, detailed in Table 2. It was recognized in this session's discussions that the first four weaknesses, specifically: leadership failures, integrity, accountability, and misplaced loyalty, along with alcohol and drug abuse were the root causes of almost all of the 33 SEALs removed from service due to mishaps and misconduct (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020).

Table 2
Strengths and Weaknesses Discussed in 2005

Strengths	Weaknesses
Warrior Reputation	Leadership Failures
Innovative	Integrity
Adaptable	Accountability
Strong Work Ethic	Misplaced Loyalty
Success in Combat	Ego / Arrogance
Team Attitude	Communication
Aggressiveness	Lack of Mentoring
	Professional
	Development
	Drug and Alcohol
	Abuse

Of particular concern in the discussions were charismatic narcissists within the ranks that could use the strengths of the SEAL Teams toward behaviors that did not align with the Nation's objectives. Thus, the SEAL ethos would need to resonate at all levels of the community, address these key concerns, capture the heritage of the SEAL Teams, and be applicable in all occasions. It would most importantly be the standard in which SEALs would be internally judged and held accountable amongst each other (B. Wilson, personal communication, December, 2020).

From the elements in Table 1 and Table 2, the groups were each assigned a segment to work on. At the end of the day, each group would describe and edit their segment with the help of all of the groups (M. Martin, personal communication, December, 2020). The segments were then ordered appropriately for flow (NSWC, 2005). The initial segment defined who SEALs

are, "a special breed of warrior, forged by adversity" (NSWC, 2005). The second segment incorporates the symbol of the community, the SEAL pin known as the trident, with what it symbolizes: honor, heritage, trust, and responsibility. It takes almost a year of intense training, where there is an attrition rate of 65-80%, before earning one's SEAL pin. The long pathway to becoming a SEAL could be thwarted by immaturity and poor decisions. The ethos was expected to be used in misconduct proceedings as a standard in clear terms and displayed at the quarterdeck (entrance) of each SEAL command (M. Martin, personal communication, December, 2020).

The trident is a symbol of the next segment of the ethos, what it means to be a member of the community, a guardian "defending those who are unable to defend themselves," who does not seek recognition for one's actions, and voluntarily placing the security of others before oneself (NSWC, 2005). In drafting the ethos, it was recognized that it would be important at funerals in honoring the principles to which fallen warriors lived their lives.

The next several segments of the ethos entailed the most important attributes agreed upon by the groups. The first, professionalism, could be summed up as honor on and off the battlefield, stoic control of emotions and actions, and integrity with one's word as their bond. Leadership was recognized as an essential warrior attribute in every SEAL, officer and enlisted, to lead and expect to be led. Resilience in the next segment is reinforced through every step of SEAL training, to never quit. "If knocked down, I get back up, every time." Resilience also requires the next attribute, adaptability, expecting innovation and a growth mindset. Finally, the ethos describes the warrior mindset on the battlefield, "fight to win," "swift and violent," and how the SEAL

is guided by these principles. The ethos describes all of these segments as a legacy passed along over generations of SEAL warriors that must be upheld each day.

These attributes were something that needed to be revisited and communicated often. The groups felt that it was important for all members of the Teams

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to carry a daily reminder and therefore, developed a laminated card to be carried in every member's wallet that captured the main concepts of the ethos. The main concepts of the SEAL ethos that each SEAL now carries are:

- Loyalty to Country, Team, and Teammate
- Serve with Honor and Integrity On and Off the Battlefield
- Ready to Lead, Ready to Follow, Never Quit
- Take Responsibility for Your Actions and the Actions of Your Teammates
- Excel as Warriors through Discipline and Innovation
- Train for War, Fight to Win, Defeat our Nation's Enemies
- Earn Your Trident Every Day

The SEAL Teams, as with many warrior cultures, are given a tremendous responsibility of taking other's lives in the course of one's official duties. The immense trust by the American people in SEALs and other warriors to apply deadly force in chaotic situations requires an overarching ethos due to the unpredictable nature of combat. The erosion of this special trust because of the poor judgement and actions of a small number of SEALs was a catalyst to creating the SEAL Ethos. The ethos was created to provide a standard for SEALs to measure their daily activities on and off the battlefield. It also was recognized that it was necessary within the SEAL ranks to guard against charismatic narcissists that could take the camaraderie and loyalty within the Teams in negative directions. The SEAL ethos is often referenced in funerals, misconduct proceedings, and in counseling. It continues to be a standard within the SEAL warrior culture of what is expected. The ethos card continues to be carried by many SEALs as a daily reminder of this code.

The U.S. Naval Academy's Approach to Warrior Ethos Development

The SEAL ethos is a code that was articulated for a warrior culture that has passed through the crucible fire. It was primarily to codify a standard for SEALs to live by. In addition to this example, it is helpful to also look at how the warrior ethos is instilled at the individual level at the beginning of the warrior's journey. At the U.S. Naval Academy, the warrior ethos comes in several forms over the course of four years. Physically, it is instilled in midshipmen through a myriad of combatives classes that contextualize the words of boxer Mike Tyson, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth" (Beradino, 2012). Warrior ethos is also extended into the classroom with the Code of the Warrior elective and Ethics class that all sophomore

midshipmen must take. Finally, it is also present in the Warrior Toughness modules that have been recently injected into the four core leadership classes all midshipmen take.

The physical education department of the Naval Academy is charged with physically preparing midshipmen to become professional Naval and Marine Corps officers. This is accomplished through mandatory “instruction in the fundamentals of swimming, personal defense, wellness, recreational sports, as well as through the regular administration of the Physical Readiness Test” (Physical Education Department, 2020, para 1). An integral part of this instruction is combatives education in the form of eight weeks of boxing class, eight weeks of wrestling, 16 weeks of the Marine Corps mixed martial arts, and the option to continue with additional classes in advanced boxing and martial arts I and II.

These classes are physically demanding and teach proper form and techniques for the skills required but most importantly, they teach the warrior mindset of offensive and defensive postures, resilience in getting back up after being physically taken down, and fortitude. A warrior ethos is more than just ethics for the warrior. It also includes the warrior mindset, specifically how one appropriately delivers violence to achieve an objective. During the freshman (plebe) year boxing class, students are taught the boundaries of what is acceptable in the boxing ring. Although midshipmen are given multiple two-minute rounds to punch their opponents and avoid getting punched, there are certain restrictions that students must fight under. The practice of measured violence with restraint, especially when it coincides with the physical pain of getting punched in the face, is an important lesson learned by all freshmen at the Naval Academy their first year. With each of these classes of boxing, wrestling, and mixed martial arts, violence is

encouraged in a controlled manner. Aggression and a fight to win attitude, but in a controlled, deliberate manner is the focus of the curriculum. Although these classes are not poised as ethics classes, the lessons of when and how to use violence appropriately are certainly part of the warrior ethos curriculum.

These lessons are reinforced in the classroom as well with a mandatory class for all sophomores at the Naval Academy: NE203, Ethics and Moral Reasoning for the Naval Leader. The objective of the class is to encourage students to determine social and situational pressures that influence their moral perceptions and consider several moral considerations that can guide their actions when violence is justified, *jus ad bellum*, as well as the conduct of warfare, *jus in bello*. Over the course of 16 weeks, students are exposed to moral perspectives that include virtue ethics in the Aristotle tradition as well as the stoic tradition, pride and humility, and moral courage. Particular attention is focused throughout the semester on moral injury, the consequences of when a warrior *actually does wrong* as well as where the warrior *falsely believes they have done wrong*. This is a key concept in developing a warrior ethos. Just as in the boxing class, when one is punched in the face, there is pain, a temporary loss of function, and if hit hard enough, disfigurement (Luben, 2005). Warriors are exposed to the extreme events in combat in which decisions have life and death consequences. Each of these experiences to some degree cause pain and temporary loss of function. If the experience is truly devastating, it causes disfigurement of one’s own moral compass permanently (Luben, 2005). In Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam* (1995), soldiers in the Vietnam conflict would deal with truly horrible experiences and its associated pain with exasperation; “Don’t mean nothing” and “F--- it!” were terms that would eventually signal a disfigurement of ethos for soldiers. Contemplation of moral injury and its consequences require a solid foundation of the moral

perspectives taught in the NE203 class. It is in this class that students are given some foundation in moral thinking to help prepare themselves for the uncertainty and moral fog of war.

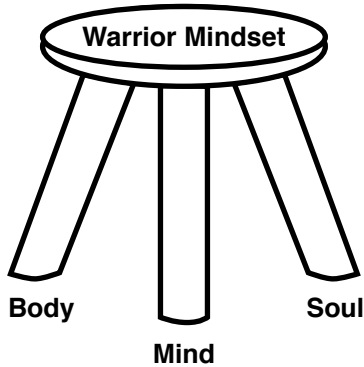
Students also have the option to continue their preparation with a military ethics elective open to all classes entitled, *The Code of the Warrior*. The course delivers lessons in warrior ethos through the historical examination of seven warrior cultures: the Sioux, the Zulu, the Samurai, the Chinese Shaolin Warrior Monks, the Templar Knights, the Roman Legion, and the women of the OSS - Special Executive France Detachment in World War II. Within each of these warrior cultures, students explore the historical context of the culture, how warriors were formed, the code the warriors lived and died by, and the consequences of breaking the code. The instructors of the course are either SEAL officers or enlisted, Explosive Ordnance Disposal officers, or US Marine Corps Infantry officers, all combat veterans who connect the material to their own recent experiences in Afghanistan and/ or Iraq. After the students have covered the material over the first 14 weeks of the 16 week course, the final two weeks are used to determine common attributes that connect these warrior codes across centuries of time and thousands of miles. The commonality of certain aspects of these warrior cultures and the connection to modern day warfare provide students examples of individual warrior codes to live by as well as organizational standards that have been the warrior's rubric for millennia. It is this warrior ethos that provides the important distinction between the labels of murderer, killer, fighter, and warrior (French, 2016).

Finally, one other way in which a warrior ethos is developed is through the warrior toughness curriculum within the four core leadership courses at the Naval Academy. Warrior toughness is taught or being

developed throughout all accession pipelines of the U.S. Navy. It was established as a program to develop a warrior mindset in sailors as they face challenges throughout all aspects of their career - in training, combat, and on the home front (Bernacchi et al., 2019). To develop the warrior mindset, the focus is on developing toughness at the intersection between the one's physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of self. The foundational idea of the warrior mindset that is developed in the warrior toughness curriculum was borrowed from the SEAL community (Department of the Navy, n.d.). At the core of this warrior mindset is a focus on training sailors, in this case future Navy and Marine Corp Officers, to be fully committed, prepared, execution ready, and have the ability to reflect upon their activities.

At the Naval Academy, the development of the warrior mindset with the warrior toughness curriculum embodies this holistic approach. Midshipmen during their first year leadership course are introduced to the ideas of warrior toughness. The image of a stool (see Figure 1), is presented to represent the warrior mindset that the Naval Academy fosters. The three stool legs represent one's body, mind, and soul to capture the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of toughness that are representative of one's warrior mindset (Department of the Navy, n.d.). It is reinforced with students that just as it is true with a stool, if any aspect is underdeveloped (any leg of the stool shorter) then warrior toughness will be out of balance. The focus in this initial course is about developing the future leader's individual warrior mindset. As part of this curriculum, students are introduced to and taught in depth the concepts of resilience, grit, hardiness, and mindfulness. There is emphasis placed on how to develop those characteristics and abilities in oneself during this initial course and a focus on how each can be tied to the legs of the stool, one's warrior mindset.

Figure 1
*Warrior Mindset Taught at U.S. Naval Academy**



*Image adapted from Warrior Toughness materials from Naval Service Training Command, Great Lakes.

In Midshipmen's second year leadership course, the focus is on how warrior toughness and ethical decision making can and should be developed simultaneously. The focus is primarily on the soul aspects of the warrior mindset and its foundation in moral reasoning. In the students' third year junior leadership course, the focus turns to how these future leaders will need to lead with a warrior mindset and build this mindset in the individuals, teams, and organizations which they will lead throughout their careers. Emphasis once again is placed on resilience, grit, hardiness, mindfulness, and their connection to the stool image of the warrior mindset. The primary difference between this and the first year course is the focus is on how future leaders build these characteristics and abilities of a warrior into others and the teams they will lead. During the fourth year at the Naval Academy, the leadership objective is on the connection between one's warrior mindset and the law, specifically a deeper dive into *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. The emphasis

becomes how to engage a warrior mindset when faced with challenging combat situations relative to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice. In teaching this material, there is a continual focus on how each aspect of the material being covered connects to various aspects of the triad (mind, body, and soul) and the development of the individual's warrior mindset.

Conclusion

Developing and instilling a warrior ethos is one of the most important responsibilities of each military community. The creation of a warrior ethos is not an easy task. Careful consideration of the cultural dynamics of the community, the nature of the individuals, and most importantly, the core purpose of the group must be made by respected members of the organization to ensure the ethos has depth and buy-in from all it hopes to affect. This approach was used by the SEALs in the development of their ethos. The members of the community to create the SEAL ethos were specifically chosen because of their experience and respect within the community. A measured approach was used to include many voices in the creation and the framing of the ethos. Fifteen years later, the SEAL Ethos is still

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used as it was originally intended. It is used as a standard within the community to articulate the ultimate sacrifice SEALs have made as well as cited when SEALs are not upholding the standard. Not only is it front-loaded in the selection and assessment of SEAL candidates, but

also in identification of the suitability of potential candidates before they arrive at the initial SEAL selection course. The SEAL community now hosts a continuum of recruiting, assessment, selection, and training (RAST) that assesses the character, cognitive, and leadership attributes supporting the SEAL ethos prior to entering the training pipeline (RADM W. Howard, personal communication, January, 2021). Ultimately, the creation of the SEAL ethos shows a systematic approach to developing a code as a standard of behavior for warriors.

The approach at the U.S. Naval Academy provides an overview of how to embed a warrior ethos into those that will eventually serve as warriors and leaders of warriors. The Naval Academy's approach to building an ethos highlights the importance of instilling the warrior mindset over time through both pedagogical approaches in the classroom and physical combatives training that builds stamina, restraint, and ethical decision in high stress activities. There is evidence that this approach is working. Feedback from a similar program at the Navy's Boot Camp in Great Lakes, Illinois, shows promising results from this approach. Ultimately, the Naval Academy's method to building the warrior mindset provides a multifaceted methodology, reinforced over time through mental and physical developmental techniques. Holistically, creating a warrior ethos requires a deliberate process that imbues ideals that each warrior can aspire to and live by, noting as many warrior cultures do, *memento mori* (a stoic reminder of remembering one's own mortality).

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Appendix

SEAL ETHOS

In times of war or uncertainty there is a special breed of warrior ready to answer our Nation's call. Common citizens with uncommon desire to succeed. Forged by adversity, they stand alongside America's finest special operations forces to serve their country, the American people, and protect their way of life. I am that warrior.

My Trident is a symbol of honor and heritage. Bestowed upon me by the heroes that have gone before, it embodies the trust of those I have sworn to protect. By wearing the Trident I accept the responsibility of my chosen profession and way of life. It is a privilege that I must earn every day.

My loyalty to Country and Team is beyond reproach. I humbly serve as a guardian to my fellow Americans always ready to defend those who are unable to defend themselves. I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions. I voluntarily accept the inherent hazards of my profession, placing the welfare and security of others before my own.

I serve with honor on and off the battlefield. The ability to control my emotions and my actions, regardless of circumstance, sets me apart from others. Uncompromising integrity is my standard. My character and honor are steadfast. My word is my bond.

We expect to lead and be led. In the absence of orders I will take charge, lead my teammates and accomplish the mission. I lead by example in all situations.

I will never quit. I persevere and thrive on adversity. My Nation expects me to be physically harder and mentally stronger than my enemies. If knocked down, I will get back up, every time. I will draw on every remaining ounce of strength to protect my teammates and to accomplish our mission. I am never out of the fight.

We demand discipline. We expect innovation. The lives of my teammates and the success of our mission depend on me - my technical skill, tactical proficiency, and attention to detail. My training is never complete.

We train for war and fight to win. I stand ready to bring the full spectrum of combat power to bear in order to achieve my mission and the goals established by my country. The execution of my duties will be swift and violent when required yet guided by the very principles that I serve to defend.

Brave SEALs have fought and died building the proud tradition and feared reputation that I am bound to uphold. In the worst of conditions, the legacy of my teammates steadies my resolve and silently guides my every deed. I will not fail.