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CAPTAINS OF THE SOUL

Stoic Philosophy and the Western Profession of Arms in the Twenty-first Century

Michael Evans

*To meet life as a powerful conqueror,
No fumes, no ennui, no more complaints or scornful criticisms,
To these proud laws of the air, the water, and the ground,
Proving my interior soul impregnable,
And nothing exterior shall ever take command of me.*

WALT WHITMAN, "A SONG OF JOYS" (1860)

In the new millennium Western militaries are spending a great deal of their resources on training and arming uniformed professionals for the instrumental rigors of operational service. Most modern armed forces equip their personnel with the latest body armor, the best protected vehicles, and the most sophisticated counterexplosive electronics, acquiring as well the most advanced medical services for those physically wounded or maimed. Much less time is devoted to providing military personnel with existential or inner armaments—with the mental armor and philosophical protection—that is necessary to confront an asymmetric enemy who abides by a different set of cultural rules. Much is also made in today's Western political and military circles about the need to relearn counterinsurgency, with its central tenet of winning "hearts and minds" among contested populations. Yet comparatively little is done to provide Western military professionals with sufficient moral philosophy to protect their own hearts and minds against the rigors of contemporary warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is true that all English-speaking Western militaries possess codes of behavior that govern the ethical conduct of their members. These codes tend to cover the law of armed conflict, just-war theory, and the importance of upholding humanitarian values. However, such guides, while essential, tend to be rooted in social science, law, and psychology rather than in moral philosophy, with its grounding in the great humanities.¹ Moreover, while modern ethical codes emphasize institutional rules of behavior, moral philosophy puts in the foreground

the development of personal character and the reconciliation of the individual to the social environment in which he or she operates. Ethics need, therefore, to be complemented by a stronger focus on philosophy that permits the professional military to become fully a self-conscious moral community committed to maintaining traditions essential to the integrity of its people and the discharge of its responsibilities.²

This article analyzes the importance of teaching Stoic moral philosophy within today's armed forces, covering three areas. First, the article examines the challenge to the warrior ethos emanating from the increasing postmodern instrumentalism of warfare. Second, it examines the case for upholding in the professional military a moral philosophy that is based on adapting what the British philosopher Bertrand Russell once called the virtues of "Stoic self-command."³ Third, the article discusses the extent to which philosophical values based on Stoicism might serve as moral guides to today's military professionals, by drawing on lessons and choices from Western literature, politics, and history.

THE CHALLENGE TO THE WESTERN MILITARY ETHOS: POSTMODERNITY, TECHNOLOGICAL INSTRUMENTALISM, AND HONOR

Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David R. Segal, the editors of an influential 2000 work, argued that advanced Western armed forces were undergoing an uneven, but clearly discernible, transition from modern to postmodern status.⁴ This transition, they suggested, was challenging to the professional military ethos, for two overarching reasons. First, a loosening of ties to both society and state was occurring, symbolized by the rise of a moral relativism in which "there is a shrinking consensus about what values constitute the public good, and little confidence that we know how, by the use of reason, to determine what the public good might be."⁵ Second, the rise of "revolution in military affairs" technologies based on the instrumental technology of precision and stealth pitted, they suggested, the ethos of professionalism against a growing occupational outlook.⁶ John Allen Williams, in his contribution to their volume, went so far as to conclude that "military culture is challenged by a relativistic civilian ethos from without and by the increasing civilianization of military functions and personnel orientation from within."⁷

Over the last decade, Christopher Coker, perhaps the world's leading philosopher of contemporary war, has in a series of important studies further analyzed the implications for the military profession of the onset of postmodernity.⁸ For Coker, much of the contemporary West today is dominated by what he calls an "ethics without morality," in which the existential and metaphysical ideals that have traditionally underpinned a life dedicated to military professionalism seem

increasingly obsolescent.⁹ Despite the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Coker believes, postmodern trends in operational practice and advanced technology are now so deeply entrenched in contemporary modes of warfare “that in the future there will be no place for the warrior ideal.”¹⁰ In a pessimistic tone he writes:

Even the professional soldier who volunteers to fight sees war increasingly as a trade rather than as a vocation, a job like any other, even if it differs from every other in the fear and anxiety it generates. Even if that is not true of every soldier (and we produce a few warriors still), war in the early twenty-first century does indeed seem to the rest of us rather barren, bereft of that [existential] dimension that made the warrior a human type as Hegel understood the term, a man who through war perceives his own humanity.¹¹

Other observers have written on how postmodern trends have led throughout contemporary society to an alleged decline of public honor that impacts upon the Western military’s professional ethos and its institutional notions of duty and sacrifice.¹² This development, it is contended, has had the effect of making Western militaries’ internal codes of honor less reflections of wider social beliefs than species of subculture. Writers such as Akbar S. Ahmed and James Bowman have charged that one of the major weaknesses in the contemporary West’s waging of wars is that its nations do so as “post-honor societies.”¹³ In their view, a gulf has grown between the honor codes of volunteer military professionals and parent societies, the latter of which are increasingly governed by the more relativist mores of postmodernity. This gulf, it is suggested, puts Western democracies at a disadvantage when fighting opponents who are impelled by absolutist cultural imperatives based on older codes of honor.¹⁴ As Coker reflects, “the West is engaged with an [Islamist] adversary that is the product of one of the world’s great unreconstructed and unreformed honour cultures at a time when the fortunes of the West’s own honour culture are at a low ebb.”¹⁵

MORAL PHILOSOPHY FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS: THE CASE FOR REVIVING STOICISM

How does one, then, counter the rise of an instrumental vision of war and with it the growth of occupational ideals that reflect Coker’s “ethics without morality”? If there is a growing incompatibility between the norms of an evolving, postmodern era based on instrumental rationality and the values of a professional military ethos based on existential meaning, we clearly need to reinforce the philosophical inner selves of men and women in the West’s armed forces.

This article argues that one of the most effective philosophical traditions for those in military uniform is that of Stoicism. The moral philosophy of the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics as taught by such great thinkers as Epictetus, Seneca, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius offers an effective path for those who seek to

understand the existential character of the profession of arms. Yet Stoic philosophy runs against all postmodern philosophical trends and is thus unfashionable today. As Tad Brennan comments in a 2007 book, those who seek to adhere to Stoic philosophy are likely to be seen as out of touch with their age, seeking only to cling to a jumbled-up “mixture of tough-guy bravado, hypocrisy and heartlessness [that is] neither personally compelling nor philosophically interesting.”¹⁶ Why should an ancient Hellenistic philosophy noted for its harsh prescriptions and designed for life in preindustrial agrarian city-states be of any use to military professionals who have been reared in the social and material sophis-

As the ancient Stoic thinkers teach us, what truly counts is the nature of life itself as an unending form of warfare that must be confronted and mastered if one is to overcome fortune and fate.

tication of a postindustrial electronic age? The answer lies in the unchanging human dimension of the military profession, and it is this dimension—with its focus on strength of character—that links the Greek hoplites on the fields of

Attica to today’s Western soldiers in the mountains of Afghanistan.

What is most attractive about the Stoic school of philosophy is its central notion that character is fate. The ideas of Stoicism infuse much of the edifice of Western civilization, and this debt is evident in the writings of such towering intellectual figures as Montaigne, Pascal, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant, and Hume. Moreover, Stoicism in some form infuses much of Christian theology, from St. Augustine through Thomas à Kempis to the Flemish philosopher Justus Lipsius, as symbolized by the famous Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Indeed, the philosopher Charles Taylor has written of how a Christianized Stoicism, or neo-Stoicism, developed by Lipsius in the sixteenth century influenced the evolution of modern Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism—with Calvin beginning his life of religious activism by publishing a study of Seneca.¹⁷ Prominent later adherents of Stoicism have included the great Prussian general Frederick the Great, the Holocaust philosopher Viktor E. Frankl, the Russian writer and dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and the South African statesman Nelson Mandela.¹⁸

It is often argued that members of the armed services are natural Stoics, capable of repelling the psychic shock of combat through ingrained mental toughness. Such a belief is highly misleading, as the frequent incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder in modern military establishments in recent years attests. As the American scholar Nancy Sherman emphasizes in a 2005 study, “catastrophic, external circumstance can derail the best-lived life.”¹⁹ In 2008 the RAND Corporation found that nearly 20 percent of U.S. military service

members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression—what it called the “invisible wounds of war.”²⁰ To what extent a philosophy of Stoicism can assist those in uniform to prevent or mitigate modern neuropsychiatric disorders remains a matter of debate. As RAND researchers have pointed out, there remain “fundamental gaps” in our knowledge of the causal links between individual educational backgrounds, collective military training, and operational deployment, and the incidence of mental health problems.²¹ Nonetheless, as one leading American soldier, Brigadier General H. R. McMaster, U.S. Army, has observed, cultivation of Stoic-like resilience and fortitude for self-control is likely to be of value in reducing combat stress. In McMaster’s words, “Soldiers must view war as a challenge and as their duty, not as trauma.”²² This view is shared by Coker, who writes that aspiring warriors must seek “to be true to what [Ralph Waldo] Emerson calls ‘the great stoical doctrine—obey thyself.’ Nothing is more true of the warrior ethos than this doctrine.”²³

For the most part, contemporary military notions of Stoicism tend to be based on secondhand platitudes and common stereotypes about manliness, “stiff upper lips,” and “can do” willingness. Popular Stoic stereotypes include the emotionless Mr. Spock in the television series *Star Trek* and Russell Crowe’s “strength and honor” Roman soldier, Maximus, in the 1999 movie *Gladiator*. Of course, there is much more to Stoic philosophy than popular culture allows. Stoicism is a school of ancient philosophy founded by the fourth century BCE by the Greek thinker Zeno of Citium and systematized by his successors Cleanthes and Chrysippus in the third century BCE. Since Zeno’s original followers met in a public portico in Athens known as the “Painted Porch” (*Stoa Poikilē*), they came to be known as Stoics, or “men of the Porch.” The Stoic doctrines that have been bequeathed to the modern world represent a powerful method of reasoning involving the rigorous cultivation of self-command, self-reliance, and moral autonomy, a system in which an individual seeks to develop character on the basis of the four cardinal virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom.²⁴

Rigorously studied and properly applied, Stoic philosophy delivers profound insights into the challenges of military life. Peter Ryan, an Australian hero of the Second World War and author of the celebrated 1959 memoir *Fear Drive My Feet*, has written of the impact of the writings of Marcus Aurelius on his own military conduct. In it Ryan describes himself as, when coming under Japanese fire for the first time, “a shuddering mess of demoralised terror” until he recalls the teachings of Stoicism:

Then I thought of Marcus Aurelius. Hadn’t he taught me that, when Fate approached, there was no escape, but that a man would keep his grim appointment

with dignity and calm? The effect was instant; certainly I still felt great fear, but I was no longer abject. It was this recovery of self-control and self-respect . . . that preserved me through all the testing months in the [New Guinea] bush that lay ahead in 1942 and 1943.²⁵

In recent years, the most prominent and systematic advocate of military Stoicism was the distinguished U.S. naval officer, Medal of Honor recipient, and 1992 vice presidential contender Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale, who died in 2005. Stockdale's 1995 book *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* is one of the finest introductions to Stoicism and its meaning for the profession of arms.²⁶ Stockdale's personal embrace of Stoicism helped him to survive seven and a half years of systematic torture and solitary confinement, from 1965 until 1972, as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese in the dreaded "Hanoi Hilton." In the late 1970s, as President of the U.S. Naval War College, Stockdale introduced at Newport an innovative course, "Foundations of Moral Obligation" (widely known as "the Stockdale Course"), which was heavily influenced by Stoic thought. More than any other warrior-scholar in the English-speaking West, Stockdale disseminated the value of Stoic philosophy within the American and allied military establishments, even influencing the work of such literary figures as Tom Wolfe.²⁷ In particular, Stockdale did much to elevate the writings of the Stoic slave-philosopher Epictetus over those of Marcus Aurelius, by revealing the former's Stoic teachings in his *Enchiridion* (Handbook) as what Stockdale called "a manual for combat officers." As Stockdale puts it, in the pages of the *Enchiridion* "I had found the proper philosophy for the military arts as I practiced them. The Roman Stoics coined the formula *Vivere militare*—'Life is being a soldier.'"²⁸ Stockdale's writings remain highly relevant today; among the purposes of this article are to salute his legacy and extend it into the new millennium.

What are the central tenets of Stoicism, and how do they fit into the cosmology of the twenty-first-century military professional? As a philosophy, Stoicism teaches that life is unfair and that there is no moral economy in the human universe. Martyrs and honest men may die poor; swindlers and dishonest men may die rich. In this respect, the fate of both the Old Testament's Job, God's good servant, and of Shakespeare's King Lear, the exemplary father, are reminders of what we must endure from a life that fits the Stoic creed. The spirit of Stoicism as an unrelenting struggle for virtuous character in a world devoid of fairness is hauntingly captured by the Greek playwright Aeschylus in his *Agamemnon*: "He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop on the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."²⁹

The absence of a moral economy outside of the workings of our inner selves means that in the Stoic catechism there is no such category as "victimhood."

Stoicism is thus about empowerment by perception—a cultivation of an invincibility of the will by minimizing personal vulnerability through a mixture of Socratic self-examination and control of the emotions. Stoicism teaches concentration on what individuals can control—what French scholar Pierre Hadot, in his study of Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, calls the cultivation of the “inner citadel” of the soul.³⁰ Stoicism’s four great teachings may be summarized as the quest for virtue, as representing the sole human good; the understanding that external goods do not equate to human happiness; the belief that a good life strives to control emotions to enhance reason; and the conviction that virtue consists in knowing what is in one’s control and what is not.³¹

The Quest for Virtue as the Sole Human Good

For the Stoic, character is formed by freedom of personal choice. Stoicism is thus a formula for maintaining self-respect and dignity through the conscious pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice, in times of either adversity or prosperity. The realities of poverty and wealth matter only insofar as they are used to shape the essential goodness of our character. As Epictetus puts it in the *Enchiridion*, true wealth stems from righteousness, honor, and decency, viewed collectively as absolute virtue. Such virtue is wholly indifferent to all matters of mere fortune, including health and illness, wealth and poverty, even life and death. It is a message of wisdom that has echoed across the centuries. In the twentieth century, the French philosopher Simone Weil echoed Epictetus when she wrote that authentic human greatness is always found in virtue and honor manifested in a “desire for the truth, ceaseless effort to achieve it, and obedience to one’s calling.”³² Stoics firmly reject the notion of collective or social guilt as a force in shaping virtue. For the Stoic, collective guilt is an impossible proposition, simply because guilt is always about individual choice and personal wrongdoing, “even in dreams, in drunkenness and in melancholy madness.”³³ No one can ever be guilty for the act of another, and no society can be held accountable for the actions of individuals of a previous generation.

Externals Do Not Amount to Happiness

In his *Enchiridion*, Epictetus teaches us that every individual has a fundamental choice—whether to live by inner or outer values. This choice is summed up by his famous doctrine, “Of things some are in our power and others are not. In our power, are opinion, movement towards a thing [aim], desire, aversion (turning from a thing); and in a word, whatever are our own acts; not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power) and, in a word, whatever are not our own acts.”³⁴

Epictetus goes on to warn that as long as a person occupies himself with externals, he will neglect the inner self. Since one cannot control external issues,

they must become “indifferents”—that is, they are outside our will. As Epictetus puts it, “The things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint nor hindrance: but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint and in the power of others.” The Stoic pursues only that which is his own, within his power, and seeks a rational, self-sufficient existence motivated by the discipline of personal virtue.³⁵

Such an unrelenting concentration on the inner self at the expense of a life in society may strike some readers as a harsh doctrine. However, it is important to note that the Stoic philosophers never suggest that an individual should not partake of “the game of life,” the search for public success or worldly goods. They only warn that one should not become caught up in the game to the extent that it reduces individual freedom of choice and constrains the pursuit of virtue. Stoics are not unworldly. It must be remembered that two of the most important Roman Stoics, Cicero and Seneca, were wealthy politicians, while Marcus Aurelius was at once emperor, soldier, and philosopher.³⁶ A true Stoic is a participant in human affairs who understands the harsh realities of the world only too well. It is not for nothing that Epictetus compares the Stoic’s life to that of the discharge of military service to the highest standards: “Do you not know that life is a soldier’s service? . . . So too it is in the world; each man’s life is a campaign, and a long and varied one. It is for you to play the soldier’s part—do everything at the General’s bidding, divining his wishes, if it be possible.”³⁷

It is because of Stoics’ understanding of life that they will never be dismayed by happenings outside their spans of control; *Nil admirari* is their motto—“Be astonished at nothing.” In Stoic cosmology, true freedom lies in the form of how much autonomy can be gained by an individual in order to live a virtuous existence, despite the pressures of professional duties and social obligations.³⁸ One of the most fundamental of Stoic attitudes, then, is what Pierre Hadot, in his analysis of Marcus Aurelius’s thought, describes as “the delimitation of our own sphere of liberty as an impregnable islet of autonomy, in the midst of the vast river of events and of Destiny.”³⁹

Striving to Control Emotions Is the Essence of Rational Activity

The ancient Stoics believed that all moral purpose must be grounded in reason, not emotion. Consequently, emotions such as desire, pleasure, fear, and dejection must be transformed into acts of free will. For example, one suffers fear only if one *decides* to fear—for as Epictetus observes, everything in life is connected to “what lies within our will,” or in Admiral Stockdale’s interpretation, “decisions of the will.”⁴⁰ For the Stoic, the unhappiest people are those preoccupied individuals who, as Seneca puts it, have the desires of immortals combined with the fears of mortals. Such unfortunates allow emotionally based fears

concerning their bodies, worldly possessions, and relationships to assail and overcome them.⁴¹ Those who are unhappy are always “oblivious of the past, negligent of the present, [and] fearful of the future.” They exemplify the truth that “the least concern of the pre-occupied man is life; it is the hardest science of all.”⁴²

For Seneca, prosperity can come to the vulgar and to ordinary talents, but triumphing over the disasters and terrors of life takes a special prowess that is “the privilege of the great man.”⁴³ The Stoic must master the emotions of Fate, for “you do not shine outwardly because all your goods are turned inward. So does our [Stoic] world scorn what lies without and rejoice in the contemplation of itself. Your whole good I have bestowed within yourselves: *your good fortune is not to need good fortune.*”⁴⁴ The central ideal of the Stoic will is thus to master all conflicting emotions in favor of the power of reason and so create an inner self that is, in Cicero’s words, “safe, impregnable, fenced and fortified”—a harmony of mind and soul that is capable of functioning both in isolation and yet is also in comradeship with other virtuous minds.⁴⁵

Virtue Comes from Knowing What Is in One’s Control and What Is Not

As we have seen, in the inner citadel of the Stoic soul it is important to distinguish between the things that depend on human activity and the things that do not, for as Seneca notes, “it is in the power of any person to despise all things but in the power of no person to possess all things.”⁴⁶ The true meaning of personal freedom is summed up by Epictetus in the *Enchiridion*: “Whoever then wishes to be free, let him neither wish for anything nor avoid anything which depends on others: if he does not observe this rule, he must be a slave.”⁴⁷ Moreover, in order to maximize the realm of personal freedom, a Stoic competes with others only as a matter of moral choice, when virtue and self-knowledge are at stake. Epictetus warns against external appearances, since the nature of good is always within. As he puts it, “You can be invincible if you enter no contest in which it is not in your power to conquer.”⁴⁸

Ultimately, Stoicism, while challenging to modern military sensibilities, is not an impossible creed. As Nancy Sherman has argued, it should not be interpreted as a narrow philosophy aimed at creating a race of iron men, divorced from cosmopolitan concerns of fellowship and social community.⁴⁹ Rather, Stoicism is about fostering a spirit of invincibility only in the sense of a willingness to endure and overcome life’s inevitable challenges, difficulties, and tragedies. Moreover, the Stoic who seeks such invincible resolution should not be viewed as in search of moral perfection but rather as seeking constant moral progress within a social context. It is this interpretation of Stoicism—one defined by the Roman philosopher Panaetius of Rhodes as representing a

“progression towards virtue”—that is most useful as a creed for twenty-first-century military professionals.⁵⁰

According to Cicero, this is a Stoicism that upholds public service undertaken in “a spirit of humanity and mutual consideration” as the supreme good. For Cicero, in his various writings, including *On Duties*, the exemplar of such service was the great soldier and man of letters Scipio Africanus the Elder.⁵¹ In Cicero’s “The Dream of Scipio,” Africanus appears in a dream to his adoptive grandson Scipio Africanus the Younger and reveals to him the essence of public duty.⁵² The elder Africanus, conqueror of Hannibal and epitome of Roman grandeur, teaches the younger, “Every man who has preserved or helped his country, or has made its greatness even greater, is reserved a special place in heaven, where he may enjoy eternal happiness.” The key to an honorable life is found not in private affairs but in public service: “The very best deeds are those which serve your country.”⁵³

Viewed in terms of moral progression, then, the Stoic life is a profoundly human quest for knowledge and as such is a philosophical journey, never a destination—an archetype to be approximated, never an ideal to be achieved. The Stoic overcomes the playground of the Furies that life represents by developing an endurance marked by the cultivation of reason and the practice of willpower—both born out of a lifelong pursuit of good character.⁵⁴

STOIC LESSONS AND CHOICES FOR TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MILITARY PROFESSIONALS

How can so demanding a personal philosophy work within the parameters of the twenty-first-century Western military profession? Eight moral lessons and seven moral choices that reflect the influence of Stoicism emerge from the annals of Western philosophy, literature, and history. They may assist uniformed military personnel in the arming of the inner selves as they pursue their journeys of professional development.

Eight Moral Lessons from Stoicism

A first lesson concerns the need to *develop an understanding of the meaning of a human life*, assailed from three directions—the body, the external world, and personal relationships. The writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius argue that life often resembles a storm-tossed sea, not a tranquil ocean, and that one should seek to navigate its shoals and currents according to a moral philosophy. As Seneca says in his letter “The Happy Life,” the road to meaningful life lies not in the senses but in the pursuit of virtue and honor based on “self-sufficiency and abiding tranquillity.” Together, these qualities produce a constancy that in turn confers “the gift of greatness of soul”—a gift that consummates everlasting good and transcends the brevity of human existence.⁵⁵

It is also useful to recall Marcus Aurelius's injunction in his *Meditations* on the need for a philosophy of life. The *Meditations*, composed as it was in campaign tents in innumerable frontier wars against Teutonic barbarians, has an obvious resonance for members of the profession of arms today:

Of man's life, his time is a point, his existence a flux, his sensation clouded, his body's entire composition corruptible, his vital spirit an eddy of breath, his fortune hard to predict, his fame uncertain. Briefly, all the things of the body, a river; all the things of the spirit, dream and delirium; his life is a warfare and a sojourn in a strange land, his after-fame oblivion. What then can be his escort through life? One thing and one thing only, Philosophy.⁵⁶

For many Stoics, meaningful living is further symbolized by Xenophon's story about Hercules's choice. On the eve of manhood, Hercules retires to the desert to reflect on his future. He is soon visited by two goddesses, Aretē (Virtue) and Hēdonē (Pleasure), who offer him different paths in life. Aretē offers Hercules an arduous path with much pain, labor, and tumult but also true meaning, moral purpose, and enduring honor. In contrast, Hēdonē offers him a pleasurable path of sensual ease, repose, and sumptuous living but without lasting significance. Hercules, with philosophical wisdom, chooses *aretē* and a life of struggle but one defined by righteous action, fidelity, honor, and decency.⁵⁷

A second lesson from the Stoic canon concerns the question of *how a military professional should face his day*, and again one can draw upon Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. Marcus believed that "a man should stand upright, not be held upright."⁵⁸ A virtuous soul must always seek moral autonomy, because it is engaged in a personal journey to eternity. An individual's true power comes from the inner strength arising from a self-mastery that is honed to overcome the ebb and flow of frustration and failure. For the Roman soldier-emperor, then, daily moral life was about honorable action irrespective of the circumstances that an individual must face and to this end he offered the following sage advice:

Say to yourself in the early morning: I shall meet today inquisitive, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, uncharitable men. All these things have come upon them through ignorance of real good and ill. But I, because I have seen that the nature of good is the right and of ill the wrong, and that the nature of the man himself who does wrong is akin to my own (not of the same blood and seed, but partaking with me in mind, that is in a portion of divinity), I can neither be harmed by any of them, for no man will involve me in wrong, nor can I be angry with my kinsman or hate him; for we have come into the world to live together.⁵⁹

For Marcus, those who behave badly do so because they lack Stoic character and value the external "indifferents" in life; theirs is a rationality that remains untoured by the quest for virtue. In contrast, the Stoic, aside from necessary

cooperation with others for the common good, will always remain personally aloof from those who possess “ignorant and unlearned” souls.⁶⁰

A third lesson of great value imparts the central tenet of Stoicism, namely, *knowing what one can control and what one cannot control*. Here a military professional can take to heart Epictetus’s advice in the *Enchiridion* to the effect that we always have a choice about the character of our inner lives and that trying to control or change what we cannot only results in anguish and torment. As Epictetus puts it, “If you desire anything which is not in our power, you must be unfortunate; but of the things in our power, and which it is good to desire, nothing is yet before you”; therefore,

“Pursue nothing that is outside us, nothing that is not our own.”⁶¹

This tenet does not translate to mere passivity in the storm of

A gulf has grown between the honor codes of volunteer military professionals and parent societies.

events. On the contrary, the Stoic interior character can exert its own will in a duel with external events with the power with which a magnet draws iron.

How an individual military professional exerts his will on an external situation is illuminated by Charles de Gaulle’s pre–World War II reflections on philosophy and military self-reliance in the opening chapters of his 1932 book *The Edge of the Sword*. Influenced by Cicero’s notion that character exhibits the supreme value of self-reliance and that “great men of action have always been of the meditative type,” the French soldier and future statesman wrote that when faced with the challenge of events, the man of character has recourse to himself, for “it is character that supplies the essential element, the creative touch, the divine spark, in other words, the basic fact of initiative.”⁶² The instinctive response of the man of character “is to leave his mark on action, to take responsibility for it, to make it *his own business*.” Such an individual “finds an especial attractiveness in difficulty, since it is only by coming to grips with difficulty that he can realise his potentialities.”⁶³ After France’s disastrous defeat of 1940, de Gaulle lived these tenets first as leader in exile of the Free French and later, after 1958, as president of his country, in the cauldron of counterrevolutionary warfare in Algeria.

A powerful fourth lesson deals with how *happiness can be found only within*, and again a military professional can make use of Epictetus’s and Marcus Aurelius’s writings—this time in the form of their teaching that maximizing individual freedom is the only worthy goal in life. Happiness born out of such a sense of freedom depends on the interaction of three spheres of personal activity: the *discipline of desire* (control of emotions), the *discipline of assent* (the exercise of judgment based on reason), and the *discipline of action* (the pursuit of

honorable service).⁶⁴ Here one can learn from the great seventeenth-century French thinker René Descartes, whose moral philosophy has been described as a form of neo-Stoicism.⁶⁵ In his “Discourse on Method,” Descartes writes that the path to human happiness is to be found in the disciplines of Stoic thought. Descartes described the “third maxim” of his system of morals as follows:

My third maxim was always to *conquer myself rather than fortune*, and to alter my desires rather than change the order of the world, and generally to accustom myself to believe that there is nothing entirely within our power but our own thoughts: so that after we have done our best in regard to the things that are without us, our ill-success cannot possibly be failure on our part.⁶⁶

Although such an approach required great self-discipline and “long exercise and meditation often repeated,” in it, concludes Descartes, “is to be found the secret of those philosophers who, in ancient times, were able to free themselves from the empire of fortune, or despite suffering or poverty, to rival their gods in their happiness.”⁶⁷

The fifth lesson suggests that *events do not necessarily hurt us, but our views of them can*. In this respect, the Stoics urge the use of reason to ensure correct perception, since if we cannot always choose our external circumstances, we can always choose how we shall respond to them. The Stoic view of life as a valiant response to a fate that must be borne is immortalized in the poem “Invictus” (Invincible), written in 1875 by William Ernest Henley, an Englishman who endured a lifetime of debilitating illness and infirmity. Despite his great suffering, Henley chose to remain undiminished, and the unconquerable spirit he represented is enshrined in the lines of what is regarded by many today as the personification of the Stoic creed:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutches of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishment the scroll.
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.⁶⁸

Henley's Captain of the Soul is unflinching and unyielding, not least in the face of the ultimate adversity—death. Here, we should note the Stoic teaching that death is everyone's fate and should not be unduly feared. As Marcus Aurelius dryly observes, "An unscientific but none the less a helpful support to disdain of death is to review those who have clung tenaciously to life." Similarly, Seneca writes that because life is brief and perishable, "everything must therefore be borne with fortitude, because events do not, as we suppose, happen but arrive by appointment."⁶⁹

From a military perspective, perhaps the ultimate Stoic view of how to master the spectre of death can be found in the works of the former World War II combat infantryman and writer James Jones, the author of *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*. Jones has been described as "the Tolstoy of the foot soldiers," a "mid-twentieth century American stoic, akin to Marcus Aurelius in his long apprenticeship to war, suffering, and the effort to bear it all."⁷⁰ Detesting those who, from afar, glorified war, Jones loved the American fighting man; his essay "Evolution of a Soldier," from his 1975 book *WW II*, is a bracing Stoic text for military professionals facing the test of combat. With searing honesty, Jones writes that the most successful combat soldier makes a "final full acceptance of the fact that his name is already written down in the rolls of the already dead":⁷¹

Every combat soldier, if he follows far enough along the path that began with his induction, must, I think, be led inexorably to that awareness. He must make a compact with himself or with Fate that he is lost. Only then can he function as he ought to function, under fire. He knows and accepts beforehand that he's dead. . . . That soldier you have walking around there with this awareness in him is the final end product of the EVOLUTION OF A SOLDIER.⁷²

Jones admits that this is a grim and hard philosophy, but he argues that those who accept the status of the "living dead" paradoxically find their fatalism vibrant and life affirming, since "the acceptance and the giving up of hope create and reinsert hope in a kind of reverse-process photo-negative function." In accepting a Stoic doctrine that "sufficient unto the day is the existence thereof," many soldiers ironically increase their chances of battlefield effectiveness and personal survival. They learn to hate war and yet also to love the drama, excitement, and comradeship as aids in overcoming the dread of death in combat. Still others learn through experience to rationalize and master war's harsh purpose and rigorous demands and make it their lives' great professional calling.⁷³ Jones's

perceptive Stoical meditations on how a soldier can respond to the external circumstances of battle, which are beyond his personal control, are among the most realistic writings ever penned on modern war. They represent a timeless testament for all those in uniform who seek to be Henley's Captains of the Soul.

A sixth lesson upholds the great Stoic truth that *character matters more than reputation*. Echoing Charles de Gaulle, General George C. Marshall once observed those who are called to lead men in battle must be judged less on technical ability than on character, on a reputation for fairness, patriotic purpose, and selfless determination.⁷⁴ A good way of reinforcing this message is to read Howard Spring's 1940 novel *Fame Is the Spur*, the tale of the rise of an idealistic British working-class political leader, Hamer Radshaw, who in pursuit of high office becomes corrupted, renouncing every principle he ever espoused and every person who ever placed faith in him.⁷⁵ Making a cavalry sabre his honor symbol, he gradually allows its blade to lie unused. In a memorable scene in the 1947 film of Spring's book, Radshaw at the end of his life, resplendent with accumulated honors and a peerage, tries to draw the sword, only to find that the blade has rusted in its scabbard. The scene is a metaphor of a career in which Radshaw's soul has rusted in his body and his moral principles have withered in the face of unrelenting personal ambition.⁷⁶

A seventh lesson is that in the Stoic world, *effective leadership and good conduct are always dependent on a willingness to play the role that is assigned*. For those who aspire to be military Stoics, mastery of the "three disciplines" of desire, assent, and action is all-important.⁷⁷ At every stage of his military career, no matter what the personal discomfort, the professional officer must seek to behave correctly. As Epictetus puts it, life is like a play, and "it is your duty to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part belongs to another."⁷⁸

Particularly relevant to the military professional is the Stoic's "discipline of action," the need for honorable and "appropriate actions" when serving the greater good. A useful reminder of what can happen when such appropriate actions are ignored is James Kennaway's *Tunes of Glory*, a concise and powerful 1956 study of military character.⁷⁹ Set in an unnamed peacetime Scottish Highland regiment in the early post-Second World War era, the novel explores what happens when an acting battalion commander refuses to give his loyalty to an appointed successor. The passed-over officer, the extrovert Major Jock Sinclair, is an up-from-the-ranks hero of El Alamein whose charismatic wartime leadership and natural aggression have in peacetime conditions been reduced to a residue of professional soldiering bolstered by hard drinking and boorish behavior masquerading as manliness. Sinclair is replaced by a polar opposite, the cultivated but sensitive Lieutenant Colonel Basil Barrow, a graduate of Eton,

Sandhurst, and Oxford, a former prisoner of war of the Japanese and “Special Duties” officer.

In a mixture of aggressive spirit, hurt pride, and class resentment, Sinclair refuses to accept his loss of command for the good of the regiment. The wily Sinclair constantly criticizes and undermines the new commanding officer, and his psychological and physical subversions confuse and divide the battalion’s officers and noncommissioned officers.⁸⁰ A court-martial brings a crisis that eventually implodes into a double tragedy in the form of Barrow’s suicide and Sinclair’s mental collapse from a belated sense of guilt for the lethal consequences of his coarse egocentrism. As a study of military character, *Tunes of Glory* is a compelling reminder of the need for Stoic self-discipline and of the demands of duty and obligation irrespective of individual feelings. As a study of character, the book can be usefully supplemented by the masterly British film made under the same title in 1960.⁸¹

An eighth and final Stoic lesson *concerns the question of suffering and where the line of goodness may be found in life*. For the military professional, suffering is an inescapable part of duty, and here one can do no better than study Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s reflections, in his monumental *The Gulag Archipelago*, on how the collision between “the soul and barbed wire” may yet become a transformative force for good. Solzhenitsyn’s chapter “The Ascent”—one of the greatest pieces of twentieth-century writing—is about nourishment of the soul in the midst of despair and hardship. The Russian dissident writes of how misfortune may become the raw material from which the soul “ripens from suffering.”⁸² In “The Ascent” Solzhenitsyn, despite years of dehumanization in the Soviet prison system, reaches a Stoic consciousness about the essential individual nature of good and evil and the power of personal revelation.⁸³ He accepts that while it is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, “it is possible to constrict it within each person” by an awakening of omniscience, from a self-knowledge of good that is born out of suffering:⁸⁴

It was only when I lay there on the rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not between states nor between classes nor between political parties but right through every human heart, through all human hearts. . . . Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the *evil inside a human being* (inside every human being).⁸⁵

Prison had nourished Solzhenitsyn’s soul in the pursuit of virtue, allowing him to write, “I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me. . . . *Bless you prison*, for having been in my life!”⁸⁶

Solzhenitsyn's world is that inhabited earlier by other Stoics denied human freedom, including the great Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, America's James Stockdale, and South Africa's Nelson Mandela. All of these extraordinary figures underwent a form of Solzhenitsyn's ascent of the soul and reached Stoic transcendence through suffering. Their experiences and their subsequent lives echo Seneca's wise teaching that "disaster is virtue's opportunity," for true character can never be revealed without a struggle with adversity—just as "gold is tried by fire, brave men [are tested] by misfortune."⁸⁷

Seven Moral Choices from Stoicism

All members of the profession of arms face a career in which moral choices are inescapable. Stoicism may assist individuals in applying judgments born out of the cultivation of good character. The following seven moral choices, all drawn from Western literature and history, are offered as a framework for the moral decision making of military professionals.

The first of these choices—*deciding the kind of military professional you want to be*—is drawn from Anton Myrer's 1968 novel *Once an Eagle*, about the American profession of arms between the First World War and the beginnings of Vietnam. Although the setting of the book is firmly American in style and tone, Myrer's tale is a universal one.⁸⁸ In it two officer archetypes are contrasted. The first archetype is the dutiful and Stoic Sam Damon, a moral warrior and an exemplar of all that is best in the profession of arms. The second is the Epicurean and brilliantly cynical careerist Courtney Massengale, an officer of many social connections but whose moral compass is as corrupt as that of Lord Henry Wotton in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Damon and Massengale both rise to become generals, but their careers are in stark contrast. The Stoic Damon, a straight-talking "mustang" (i.e., up from the ranks) with a brilliant World War I combat record, is no match for the silken malice of Massengale, especially in the flick-knife political world of the U.S. Army staff in Washington. As a result, over the years Damon, the complete military professional, is perpetually outranked and outmaneuvered by Massengale's unscrupulous careerism—a careerism symbolized by insouciant charm and great verbal facility and propelled by an "astonishing intellectual prowess like some jeweled sword."⁸⁹

As Damon's superior officer during World War II in the Pacific and later in Southeast Asia, Massengale regards Damon's relentless honesty and single-minded military integrity not as operational assets but as obstacles to his own advancement. Massengale dismisses Damon's frequent professional protestations over his self-seeking command methods as naïve: "Like most strictly combat types he [Damon] lacks political savoir faire."⁹⁰ Myrer's sprawling saga

becomes a powerful meditation on the moral choices involved in military officership and upon the eternal danger that the unscrupulous Massengales pose to the honest Damons. Indeed, both the title and tone of the book are taken from Aeschylus's famous lines:

So in the Libyan fable it is told
That once an eagle stricken with a dart,
Said, when he saw the fashion of the shaft,
“With our own feathers, not by others' hands,
Are we now smitten.”⁹¹

The second moral choice that will confront many Western officers in particular is *the substance of officership as a choice between a quest for status and a search for real achievement*. Here a useful model is the tempestuous career of the brilliant U.S. Air Force colonel John Boyd—a man whom some observers have regarded as “the American Sun Tzu,” because of his espousal of maneuver warfare and the novel “OODA” (observe, orient, decide, act) decision cycle. Boyd was an irascible and outspoken intellectual maverick whose views were always at odds with the U.S. Air Force establishment. Consequently, his strategic ideas were unwelcome and remained little appreciated during his professional career.⁹²

Today, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, those who opposed and impeded Boyd's career are forgotten men, while Boyd's influence permeates advanced military doctrine throughout the West. In retrospect, his dogged pursuit of strategic innovation can now be seen as a monument of moral courage, a tribute to imaginative professional perseverance, and a salutary reminder that professional militaries often neglect their finest minds. Boyd's spirit of officership is conveyed in his Stoic-like “to be or to do, that is the question,” speech delivered to military colleagues and subordinates in the Pentagon in June 1974:

You have to make a choice about what kind of person you are going to be. There are two [military] career paths in front of you, and you have to choose which path you will follow. One path leads to promotions, titles and positions of distinctions. To achieve success down that path, you have to conduct yourself a certain way. You must go along with the system. . . . The other path leads to doing things that are truly significant for the Air Force, but you may have to cross swords with the party line on occasion. You can't go down both paths, you have to choose. Do you want to *be* a man of distinction or do you want to *do* things that really influence the shape of the Air Force? To be or to do, that is the question.⁹³

A third moral choice facing military professionals involves *the need to resist the corrosive influence on the warrior spirit of bureaucratization*. As Charles de Gaulle once wrote, the true combat officer must always keep his intellect focused

on the art of war and resist the intrusion of bureaucratic politics—for only through a dedicated pursuit of military philosophy “will an edge be given to the sword.”⁹⁴ A good example of this moral choice is exemplified by Emmanuel Wald’s 1992 book *The Decline of Israeli National Security since 1967*, in which the author analyzes the conceptual confusion and analytical failings of the Israeli officer corps—confusion and failings that arguably came to a head during the reverses suffered in the second Lebanon war, in 2006.⁹⁵

Wald’s book warns that during the 1970s and 1980s the Israeli Defense Force’s much-vaunted operational philosophy, honed in the 1948, 1956, and 1967 wars against the Arabs, became corroded by “a procedure of nonstrategy” based on bureaucratic compromise and conformity.⁹⁶ Wald quotes General Israel Tal’s speech at the Israeli National Defense College in April 1979 on how bureaucratic arrogance, intrigue, and mediocrity can combine to destroy the creative imagination that is fundamental to future generals:

[Israeli] officers at the rank of captain or major, naïve and full of youthful enthusiasm, believe they will be judged by their achievements. Lacking bureaucratic experience, they will try to exercise critical and original thought. . . . If these officers do not grasp that it is forbidden to damage bureaucratic harmony and coddling they will quickly be dropped from the IDF [Israeli Defense Force] system which does not tolerate deviants. If they are able to last in an organisation which, by its very nature, enslaves and constrains the thinker, then they will eventually, after many years of learning, reach the rank of general. By then, of course, not much can be expected from them in terms of creative thinking.⁹⁷

A fourth moral choice for those in uniform arises from the proposition that *no individual of character can remain neutral in a moral crisis*. Here much can be learned from the 1930s “wilderness years” of Winston Churchill, during which, in Stoic-like grandeur, he waged a lonely crusade to warn the British people about the mortal threat that growing Nazi power posed to Western civilization. In particular, Churchill’s 1948 *The Gathering Storm* is instructive, for in this volume of his monumental history of the Second World War the great statesman documents how the liberal democracies of the 1930s lacked essential elements of character, persistence, and conviction in matters of international security. Western policy toward Hitler’s Germany took the form of moral compromise, based on the policy of appeasement. Knowing that this failure of statesmanship was to create a war in which the worst “material ruin and moral havoc” in recorded history would be inflicted upon humanity, Churchill reflects:

It is my purpose as one who lived and acted in those days to show how easily the tragedy of the Second World War could have been prevented; how the malice of the wicked was reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous. . . . We shall see how the

councils of prudence and restraint may become the prime agents of mortal danger; how the middle course adopted from desires for safety and a quiet life may be found to lead direct to the bull's-eye of disaster.⁹⁸

Churchill's book embodies his famous moral lesson: "In War: Resolution / In Defeat: Defiance / In Victory: Magnanimity / In Peace: Good Will."⁹⁹

A fifth choice that reflects Stoic teaching revolves around *the necessity for a military professional always to make the best of adversity*. As Seneca argues, the individual of good character will always seek to turn adversity to advantage, for "the thing that matters is not *what* you bear but *how* you bear it."¹⁰⁰ There are interesting connections between Stoicism and Christianity here, as evidenced in such works as St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*.¹⁰¹ As mentioned earlier, a Christianized form of Stoicism was disseminated in the sixteenth century by Justus Lipsius, upholding Seneca's teaching that "we are born into a kingdom; to obey God is to be free." Indeed, the origins of the Western professional military ethic itself can be traced to Lipsius's Christian neo-Stoicism and its influence over such early modern Western military reformers as Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus, and Oliver Cromwell.¹⁰² Given these connections, the anonymous "Soldier's Prayer" from the American Civil War, found in a military prison in 1865 (and given below as reproduced by Admiral Stockdale), repays reading as both a Stoic and Christian testament:

We asked for strength that we might achieve,
 God made us weak that we might obey.
 We asked for health that we might do great things
 He gave us infirmity that we might do better things
 We asked for riches that we might be happy;
 We were given poverty that we might be wise.
 We asked for power that we might have the praise of men;
 We were given weakness that we might feel the need of God
 We asked for all things that we might enjoy life;
 We were given life that we might enjoy all things
 We received *nothing* that we asked for
 But all that we *hoped* for
 And our prayers were answered. We were most blessed.¹⁰³

The sixth moral choice that military professionals need to ponder is *whether they are willing to pay the terrible price that may be required when choosing to act out of conscience and principle*. Nowhere in recent military history is this better illustrated than by the German army officers who joined the abortive 20 July 1944 VALKYRIE plot to kill Adolf Hitler, as recounted by such eminent historians

as Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, Peter Hoffmann, and Joachim Fest.¹⁰⁴ Much inspiration can be drawn from the actions of Brigadier General Henning von Tresckow and Colonel Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, who were the noblest spirits behind the 1944 conspiracy to rid Germany of a criminal regime. Both men came to view Hitler as the Antichrist, the archenemy of both Germany and Western civilization, whose death was a redemptive necessity “before the eyes of the world and of history.”¹⁰⁵

Immediately following the failure of the assassination attempt, von Tresckow prepared to commit suicide with a grenade in order to deny the SS the opportunity to torture him into revealing the names of other conspirators. As this young general and cultured German patriot left his Eastern Front headquarters on 21 July 1944 to take his own life in no-man’s-land, he turned to his adjutant, Captain Fabian von Schlabrendorff, and said with Stoic poignancy:

When, in a few hours, I go before God to account for what I have done and left undone, I know I will be able to justify in good conscience what I did in the struggle against Hitler. God promised Abraham that He would not destroy Sodom if just ten righteous men could be found and I hope God will not destroy Germany. None of us can bewail his own death; those who consented to join our circle put on the robe of Nessus. A human being’s moral integrity begins when he is prepared to sacrifice his life for his convictions.¹⁰⁶

Tresckow’s courageous participation in the doomed 1944 assassination plot embodies Seneca’s famous challenge: “What is the duty of the good man? To offer himself to Fate,” for “good men toil, spend and are spent, and willingly.”¹⁰⁷

A seventh and final moral choice for military professionals concerns the need to *submit oneself to the spirit of endurance*. Such a choice reflects the Stoic teaching that true courage represents steadfastness of soul, expressed in a decision to bear and forbear the storms of life over time and circumstance. In Seneca’s words, “The demonstration of courage can never be gentle. Fortune scourges and rends us; we must endure it. It is not cruelty but a contest, and the oftener we submit to it the braver shall we be.”¹⁰⁸

Here much wisdom can be gleaned from the writings of the philosophers Aristotle and Arthur Schopenhauer, from the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl, from former British prime minister Gordon Brown, and from the American war correspondent and novelist Glendon Swarthout.¹⁰⁹ In his insightful reflections on the meaning of courage, Aristotle warns us that true courage differs from audacity.¹¹⁰ The latter is counterfeit courage; it is based on an “excess of intrepidity,” on a physical impulsiveness that represents “a boastful species of bravery and the mere ape of manhood” and may conceal a fundamental moral cowardice. For Aristotle, real courage—particularly in its

military manifestation—is based on a combination of confidence and caution, on the capacity for discriminating thought and clear judgment, and it prefers “the grace and beauty of a habitual fortitude.”¹¹¹

Both Arthur Schopenhauer and Viktor Frankl arrive at a similar conclusion on courage as a form of fortitude. In his writing on ethics, Schopenhauer defines courage as “a kind of endurance.”¹¹² Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning* echoes the work of Epictetus, in stating that the way one behaves in a situation depends more on personal decisions rather than on impersonal conditions.¹¹³ He

Ethics need to be complemented by a stronger focus on philosophy that permits the professional military to become fully a self-conscious moral community.

holds that all faced by physical danger and moral adversity have at their disposal a master key to pick the lock of courage, in the form of “the last of human freedoms—[the right] to choose one’s

attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”¹¹⁴ More recently, in his *Courage: Eight Portraits*, Gordon Brown concentrates on courage in the Stoic spirit, not simply as physical audacity but as prolonged exposure to danger and risk in the form of “sustained altruism,” exhibited by committed individuals as diverse as the British wartime nurse Edith Cavell, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Burmese political dissident Aung San Suu Kyi. Brown quotes approvingly Churchill’s famous remark that “courage is the first of all human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all the others.”¹¹⁵

Perhaps nowhere in twentieth-century American military literature are Aristotle’s distinction between mere audacity and real courage, Frankl’s “last of human freedoms,” and Brown’s notion of “sustained altruism” better illustrated than in Glendon Swarthout’s Pulitzer Prize–nominated 1958 novel *They Came to Cordura*, one of the most insightful literary meditations ever composed on what constitutes courage under arms.¹¹⁶ Swarthout’s novel is set during the U.S. Army’s abortive 1916 punitive expedition into Mexico to chastise Pancho Villa and his revolutionaries. The central figure is Major Thomas Thorn, awards officer of the campaign, who is ordered to escort five cavalymen cited for the Congressional Medal of Honor across the barren desert of Chihuahua to the town of Cordura and safety. As the patrol moves across the stark terrain, Thorn, a middle-aged soldier tortured by the memory of his own sudden failure of nerve in a previous military engagement, ponders the qualities of the five heroes in his charge, whom he regards as members of Socrates’s “golden race.”¹¹⁷

The journey to Cordura—the town’s name means “courage” in Spanish—becomes a dark metaphor by which Swarthout examines the character of courage in wartime. The patrol is ambushed by *Villistas* and tormented by heat, thirst, and

adversity, and the golden mettle of Thorn's five "heroes" begins to betray base qualities. With the exception of Thorn, each man falters under the strain of prolonged exposure to danger and risk. Faced by the need to exhibit continuous courage, each of the five heroes chooses instead to become a moral coward. It becomes clear that the physical gallantry under fire that had been demonstrated by the five Medal of Honor candidates had been little more than Aristotle's "deformed courage" of audacity, momentary accidents in their otherwise undistinguished lives. In the end, Thorn, with classic Stoic fortitude, comes to Cordura—and thus to the meaning of courage—by delivering the flawed nominees to safety against all odds and, within sight of the town, at the sacrifice of his own life. His journey has seen him discover the reservoirs of an enduring bravery that he feared he did not possess—a realization that allows him to fulfil a sworn duty to five apparently courageous, but in reality morally unworthy, comrades.¹¹⁸

LIFE IS BEING A SOLDIER

In contemporary Western culture, the teachings of ancient Stoicism may seem redundant, but it is not so. In twenty-first-century warfare the instrumental dimension of the scientific battle space may be important to success, but warfare remains a profoundly human experience that reflects existential meaning and reveals both moral agency and character. We must remember that human nature is unchanging and that it is hubristic of any generation to suggest that it can somehow escape the long shadow cast by history. We may not live in the past, but the past lives in the present, and we ignore its wisdom at our peril. There is a famous saying (attributed to Albert Einstein) that is especially pertinent to advanced Western militaries in the new millennium—"Not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that can be counted, counts."

As the ancient Stoic thinkers teach us, what truly does count is the nature of life itself as an unending form of warfare that must be confronted and mastered if one is to overcome fortune and fate. While we can never insulate ourselves from misfortune, tragedy, or suffering, Stoicism, a philosophy of resolution that spans the ages, seeks to make its adherents Captains of the Soul, building inner citadels of character, rational thought, and moral values. The Stoic journey is one of rigor and self-discipline; it demands a regime of constant self-improvement. It does not promise a life of comfort or ease and one can expect to become only a reasonable archetype of the successful Stoic, since perfect wisdom and complete equanimity are unreachable ideals. In words that are not for the fainthearted, Epictetus warns of the endurance required from the master Stoic: "Show me a man who though sick is happy, who though in danger is happy, who though dying is happy, who though condemned to exile is happy, and who though in dispute is happy! Show him to me! By the gods, I would then see a Stoic!"¹¹⁹

Yet for all its ascetic challenges and arduous demands, a Stoic philosophy has much to offer today's Western uniformed professionals in their pursuit of *vivere militare*. Nowhere is this truer than in the Stoic teaching that real courage is in itself endurance of the human spirit. Such courage is based on a resilience in which individuality is embedded within a larger community of comradeship, a unity of self and society that upholds a balance between the principles of private excellence and public duty. For these reasons, the Stoic philosophy bequeathed to us by the Hellenistic Age will continue to find new adherents in the twenty-first century, not least among those who choose the lives of duty, honor, and sacrifice demanded by the military calling. As Epictetus also writes, "Great is the struggle [of the Stoic life] and divine the task. The prize is a kingdom, freedom, serenity and peace."¹²⁰ In many respects, the Stoic ideal recalls the famous injunction to the Ithacan wanderers in Tennyson's poem "Ulysses"—"To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."¹²¹ In the Stoic creed, it is always our moral mastery of the testing journey of life that abides. In this sense, Stoicism's virtues are like the stars in the night sky: they shine high above us, and while we may not always reach them, we are ennobled both by their presence and by their promise.

NOTES

1. See the works of Christopher Paul, including *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction to Legal and Moral Issues* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1941); also George R. Lucas, Jr., and Paul E. Roush, eds., *Ethics for Military Leaders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998); Martin L. Cook, *The Moral Warrior: Ethics and Service in the US Military* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 2005); and Timothy L. Challans, *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 2007).
2. Two useful studies that emphasize issues of moral character in war and that draw from classical literature are Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), and Shannon E. French, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
3. Quoted in John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2007), p. 153.
4. Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David R. Segal, "Armed Forces after the Cold War," in *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces after the Cold War*, ed. Moskos, Williams, and Segal (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 1–13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7. John Allen Williams, "The Postmodern Military Reconsidered," in *Postmodern Military*, ed. Moskos, Williams, and Segal, p. 274.
8. Christopher Coker, *Humane Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2002), *Waging War without Warriors? The Changing Culture of Military Conflict* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002), *The Future of War: The Re-enchantment of War in the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2004), *The Warrior Ethos: Military Culture and the War on Terror* (New York: Routledge, 2007), *Ethics and War in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2008), and *War in an Age of Risk* (London: Polity, 2009).
9. Coker, *Waging War without Warriors?* p. 2, and *Ethics and War in the 21st Century*, pp. 97, 137.

10. Coker, *Waging War without Warriors?* p. 160.
11. *Ibid.*
12. See Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor," in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alastair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 172–81.
13. Professor Akbar S. Ahmed, lecture (Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C., 10 March 2003, reported in *Washington Post*, 11 March 2003); James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), esp. part 3, and "Decline of the Honor Culture," *Policy Review*, no. 156 (August–September 2009), pp. 27–39.
14. Bowman, "Decline of the Honor Culture," pp. 27–39.
15. Coker, *Ethics and War in the 21st Century*, p. 112.
16. Tad Brennan, *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties and Fate* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 8–9.
17. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007), pp. 116, 119.
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