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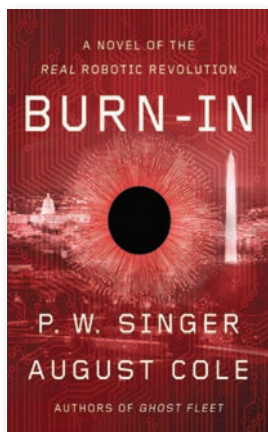


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Radio Battalion Marines conduct parachute training. (Photo by LCpl Isaac Velasco.)

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Suicide in the Marine Corps

And other considerations
by LT Matthew J. Brackett

The following reflections, not intended to be an academic or researched approach to the topic of suicide, came about because of some questions that came down the chain of command and were brought to my attention by my sergeant major. In turn, I took some quiet time to jot down reflections, shared them, and was encouraged to present them to a broader audience.

As we are aware, the Marine Corps, while a world and culture in and of itself, does not exist in a vacuum. Social trends will inevitably affect the Marine Corps. Suicide is one of these social trends that bleeds over into the Corps. Why is this social trend accentuated in the Armed Forces and the Corps? What other social trends bleed over into the Corps culture, mentality, and climate? How do these help or hinder mission readiness and accomplishment? What aspects of Marine Corps mentality, practices, and culture enhance or hamper readiness? Since the Corps does not exist in a vacuum, clear discussions and answers to these questions will enhance the ability to not only mitigate crisis but also foster growth and more holistic force readiness.

So then, if readiness is the responsibility of the unit leader, what motivates leadership to be concerned with the suicide rate in the Corps? An honest answer to this question along with finding common ground among leaders and experts will then lay the necessary groundwork for an adequate search for answers.

It is not my place to answer nor intent to answer the question around why leadership is or should be concerned with the suicide rate in the Corps. I will,

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however, lay out a variety of possible reasons: suicide is a human tragedy; suicide is a sign of failure; suicide is a cowardice act and therefore not fit for a Marine; suicide taints the institutional image; suicide is an unhealthy response to an unhealthy situation; suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary situation; suicide directly affects readiness; suicide is not the answer; and suicide leaves more questions than answers. Another possible answer could be that suicide is not a concern. An honest answer to why this is a concern is essential for an adequate approach, dialogue, debate, and response.

I will now offer a few wave-top considerations for reflection and possible discussion.

Recruit training teaches Marines that the mission of the Marine Corps is to make Marines, win battles, and return good citizens. There is a strong focus on the first two goals and a hope that the third naturally occur. If we are intentional about truly making Marines, the other two will almost be guaranteed. But what is a Marine?

It is vital for the Corps to come up with a clear answer on what is and who is the Marine we make. The first step of this foundation is that the Marine is a human being. We deceive ourselves if we expect our young warriors that join the Corps to be well grounded, developed, internally connected, integrated,

and aligned human beings. We receive men and women, usually at a young age, from society. Being young usually means not fully developed, integrated, and aligned. Oftentimes, the recruit comes from an unstable upbringing, social framework, family structure, and sub-par education; the recruit is generation Z and all that this entails; the recruit has commonly not been educated in relationship skills, parenting skills and life skills; and the recruit is generally an underdeveloped human being between the ages of eighteen to twenty years old who is told he is a member of the elite amphibious fighting force. Thirteen tough weeks of recruit training will give us an entry level Marine, Marine Combat Training will offer us a rifleman, and MOS training will offer us a fleet-ready Marine. These levels of quality training will give a *fleet ready Marine* but not necessarily a grounded, aligned, and developed human being that is a *life ready Marine*.

Young Devil Dogs are taught to believe they are the best, the strongest, the elite—and rightly so. A young Marine has stepped into a culture and mentality that is built around peer pressure, judgment, fear and shame-based motivation, perception, and acceptance or rejection according to inherent standards and values. Therein lies an unspoken erroneous logic: being human equals weakness; weakness is unacceptable;

therefore, being human is unacceptable. This one unspoken conviction is the cause of unimaginable limitations and destruction.

There is, therefore, an unconscious silent voice that proclaims it unacceptable to raise your hand and ask for support because it means one is weak, has a problem, or is a problem—and this is unacceptable. So, we stuff our problems in a closet and hope they take care of themselves, the closet gets filled, and challenges turn into crisis and crisis into a variety of visible problems that take lots of energy from leadership to manage, often leaving destruction in its wake. When being human becomes acceptable and held accountable, a healthy clarity reigns. When we serve our humanity, our humanity will serve us well; when we care for our humanity, our humanity will care for us.

The striking contradiction we are faced with is that the Corps is committed to bring death and destruction to the enemy—foreign and domestic. However, if we look at the last twenty years of war against terrorism, more of our people have been hurt, harmed, and died in our own bases, homes, and barracks than in combat. Death occurs through murder, accidents, and suicide. Hurt and harm occurs, although not exclusively, through physical and sexual assault, aggression, training accidents, and incidents involving substance abuse. These issues are part of the bigger conversation and influence in one way or another suicidal ideation and completion.

We have lost roughly 1,231 Marines to combat related deaths since between 2001–2016; we have lost roughly 426 Marines to suicide since 2012. There are many extensive studies on suicide in the military, but it is difficult to find precise suicide statistics for the Marine Corps during the last twenty years. Some light can be shed on the subject from a recent project performed by a student at Boston University, which “estimates 30,177 active duty personnel and veterans of the post 9/11 wars have died by suicide, significantly more than the 7,057 service members killed in post-9/11 war operations.”¹

Suicide, substance abuse, sexual transgressions, anger, and abuse in

its varying forms are the leaves and branches that we can talk about, brief about, and manage, but they are often manifestations of deeper challenges our people face. As a Corps, we can choose not to attend to the deeper challenges, since this is not the mission of the Corps, or we will choose to take notice, study them, and implement methods to improve the quality of our men and women. This will in turn reduce behaviors that weaken human and mission readiness, and will consequently produce better Marines, allowing us to return more quality citizens.

If we just deal with the leaves and branches, the tree of humanity and the Corps will not become healthy. We must look to the roots, to the soil and nutrients: the environment our Marines are coming from, the environment that they become part of in the Corps, and if this environment is nourishing, nurturing, and favorable to growth or not.

The Marine Corps will have to take upon itself a new mission of overseeing the human development of the ladies and gentlemen that join our ranks if we expect them to be excellent human beings, Marines, and return to society as excellent citizens. This is no small undertaking and task, and it is something the Corps did not have to concern itself with decades ago.

This is undoubtedly a massive topic to tackle, as it could mean making training longer, investing much more in people and resources for human development, greater discernment in who we recruit and accept, extending the recruitment process and requirements for acceptance into the Corps, making aspects of human development education and workshops mandatory, creating a culture where interest in personal development is not only accepted but promoted, and adapting op tempos that will protect the values of human growth, personal harmony, healthy relationships, and family stability. This may mean having a recognition or award for those that intentionally invest in personal development. This may mean having required training in order to promote. This means improving leadership styles and abilities beyond fear and shame-based leadership. This

means putting well developed human beings in roles of leading and managing human beings. This means aligning a culture with its values, not only in theory and rhetoric but in reality and practice.

The reader is reminded that my approach to this topic does not pretend to be academic or thorough but rather to present relevant reflections from my small but meaningful chaplain corner. I outlined a series of questions at the beginning that I would encourage leadership to use for discussion and work groups. While these considerations can leave us with a restless spirit and with more questions, this may be a step towards true answers to the deep concerns around suicide and other behaviors that hurt and kill our Marines here in the safety of our camps and communities.

A few concluding words of encouragement:

- When people have stable and nurturing relationships, when people experience relative internal harmony, when people are relatively content with themselves as individuals, spouses, and parents, performance will peak, readiness will be high, and command climate will be superb.
- We invest intentionally in professional development, let us promote and facilitate intentional investment in personal development. Training and education for professional development is mandated, let us begin to adamantly promote, personal, relationship and parenting development.
- When we lead our Marines as human beings first and foremost, when we invest in our people as human beings, when we give them permission to be human and deal with their humanity, the results will be forthcoming and rich.

Note

1. Thomas Suitt III, “High Suicide Rates among United States Service Members and Veterans of the Post 9/11 Wars,” *20 Years of War*, (Providence, RI: Watson Institute International & Public Affairs, June 2021).

