

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 04/05/2017		2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) September 2016 - April 2017	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Stoic Values for the 21st Century Profession of Arms				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Timothy W. Love, USMC				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Although the methods, weapons, and technologies employed in war continue to evolve, many of the challenges faced today are remarkably similar to those encountered by men at arms across millennia. In a world characterized by adversity, the Stoic philosophy provides commonsense lessons on developing inner resources – principled character, self-control, and rational thought – that empower the military professional to overcome the challenges presented by life in the 21st century profession of arms. No history book or list of maxims will provide today's military professional with penetrating answers to all of his complex					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Stoicism; Stoic Philosophy; Profession of Arms; Virtue, Professional Reading					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 38	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON USMC Command and Staff College
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

Master of Military Studies Requirements for the Degree

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE: Stoic Values for the 21st Century Profession of Arms

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR: Major Timothy W. Love

AY 16-17

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Rebecca Johnson

Approved: 

Date: 5 April 2017

Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr Bradford Wilnceman

Approved: 

Date: 5 Apr 2017

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Executive Summary

Title: Stoic Values for the 21st Century Profession Arms

Author: Major Timothy W. Love, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: In a world characterized by adversity, the Stoic philosophy provides commonsense lessons on developing inner resources – principled character, self-control, and rational thought – that empower the military professional to overcome the challenges presented by life in the 21st century profession of arms.

Discussion: Although the methods, weapons, and technologies employed in war continue to evolve, many of the challenges faced today are remarkably similar to those encountered by men at arms across millennia. While the vicarious lessons of history are irreplaceable, the military professional should not myopically limit his studies to combat. Students of the profession of arms must seek a wide-ranging education that will arm them with the knowledge, flexibility, and judgment to excel in any circumstances. In pursuing this broad development there are other realms of history, particularly philosophy, which provide exceptional instruction on the enduring nuances of human nature. The Stoic philosophy offers powerful insights on the role of character, rationality, selflessness, and introspection that empower its students to be better leaders, spouses, parents, and citizens.

Conclusion: Stoic wisdom provides a model for the 21st century profession of arms to apply to an evolving but enduringly human world of conflict. No history book or list of maxims will provide today's military professional with penetrating answers to all of his complex problems, but historical knowledge in the form of Stoic thought can light what is often a dark path.

Preface

My introduction to Stoicism came from Michael Evans's "Captains of the Soul" published in the *Naval War College Review*. Evans's work coalesced a number of lessons and ideas that I had garnered from mentors and life experience. His article gave name and form to an ethos, Stoicism, that I had in many ways unknowingly subscribed to. Evans's bibliography provided a jumping off point for further reading that gave me a greater appreciation for Stoic philosophy and the wisdom it offers. While the lessons captured and the works cited in this paper have proven beneficial to me, they are by no means exhaustive. I encourage the reader to seek out additional resources and draw their own conclusions.

In writing this paper I received support from a number of people. I would like to thank my wife Jenna, whose patience, selflessness, and insight were invaluable. I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Johnson, who granted me the latitude to explore this topic and provided valuable recommendations for strengthening this paper. Finally, I would like to thank all of the family, friends, mentors, teachers, coaches, seniors, peers, and subordinates who exemplify the virtues in this paper.

Introduction

Fear, honor, and interest drive human conflict.¹ Thucydides' assessment is as true today as it was 2500 years ago. Although the methods, weapons, and technologies employed continue to evolve, many of the challenges faced today are remarkably similar to those encountered by men at arms across millennia. Because war remains a struggle of wills,² the persistent human characteristics allow the 21st century profession of arms to draw on five thousand years of recorded history to achieve a greater understanding of the enduring challenges of warfare.

While the vicarious lessons of military history are irreplaceable, military professionals should not myopically limit their studies to combat. Students of the profession of arms must seek a wide-ranging education that will arm them with the knowledge, flexibility, and judgment to excel in any circumstances. In pursuing this broad development there are other realms of history, particularly philosophy, that provide exceptional instruction on the enduring nuances of human nature. In a world characterized by adversity, the Stoic philosophy provides commonsense lessons on developing inner resources – principled character, self-control, and rational thought – that empower the military professional to overcome the challenges presented by life in the 21st century profession of arms.

In order to introduce military professionals to the teachings of Stoic philosophy, prominent Stoic works should be incorporated on to professional military reading lists. The inclusion of Stoic texts will introduce the basic concepts of Stoicism to a wide audience and generate genuine interest in many for deeper scholarship. The resulting understanding of philosophical thought will contribute in developing the broad mindset that the profession of arms seeks to cultivate in its leaders and will empower military professionals with wisdom that makes them not only more effective leaders, but also better spouses, parents, and citizens.

In advocating for the inclusion of Stoic works on professional reading lists, this paper offers the reader a brief introduction to Stoicism's origins, its leading thinkers, and its underlying ethos. The paper then distills nine lessons derived from Stoic texts, provides examples of these teachings in action, and explains how the concepts are pertinent to the 21st century profession of arms.

Stoicism

Today Stoicism is widely misconstrued in Western popular culture. The mere mention of the word *Stoic* conjures images of a stone-faced guard at Buckingham Palace or a Hollywood caricature completely devoid of emotion. While there are elements of truth in most stereotypes, these are largely superficial characterizations. The teachings of the Stoics are far more practical than popular perceptions imply.³

The roots of Stoic thought can be traced to the third century BCE and the Athenian philosopher Zeno.⁴ Stoic thought matured over centuries and received contributions from an eclectic group of thinkers including the crippled Greek slave Epictetus (55-135 CE), the Roman playwright and government official Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE), and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE).⁵ Although most of the traditional Stoic texts are thousands of years old, strong Stoic undertones can be seen in the works of many modern-day influencers including former University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) basketball coach John Wooden, author Steven R. Covey, and US Navy Admiral James Stockdale. The diversity of Stoic thinkers over thousands of years demonstrates the enduring appeal and continued applicability of Stoicism.

The numerous contributions of this wide-ranging group of theorists dictate that there is no predominant text in Stoic philosophy; instead, its lessons are captured in dozens of works that provide insight on the path to a virtuous life. Epictetus, who taught philosophy in Rome and

Greece, never compiled his thoughts in a book. An enterprising student recorded and published Epictetus's ideas in *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*, which remain in print two thousand years later.⁶ Seneca, after serving as a tutor and government official, wrote his *Letters from a Stoic* in the twilight of his life, before being forced to commit suicide by his former pupil, the Roman emperor Nero.⁷ Marcus Aurelius recorded his *Meditations* in middle age while leading the Roman conquest of Central Europe.⁸ His *Meditations* are a private journal, full of exhortations, lessons, and reminders to himself.⁹ The fact that he never intended to publish the journal makes his unguarded thoughts all the more personal and insightful.

These many human perspectives that contribute to Stoic thought form not so much a single systematic doctrine as a winding intellectual current.¹⁰ Although there is no list of Stoic commandments, there are recurrent themes that form the nucleus of Stoic thought. The most salient of these themes can be summarized in three core ideas: virtuous character is central to a meaningful life; external goods do not equate to happiness; and a wise man strives for self-control and rational thought.¹¹

Underlying the Stoic philosophy is the belief that there is no moral economy – life is not fair, good things happen to bad people, and there is little that can be done to change this.¹² In this unfair world the Stoics seek to cultivate the “inner resources and virtues that allow for a measure of control in the face of strong temptations and hard losses.”¹³ This virtuous character is not innate, nor is it ever fully achieved; instead, it is a constant struggle to live each day in a better way than the last. In a world that often champions materialism, espouses moral relativism, and mocks those who seek virtue, Stoicism provides a powerful argument for the critical role of principled character.

The continuous process of character development requires a genuine appreciation of the world and the ability to discern what is within one's control and what is beyond it. The Stoics characterize those things beyond one's control as externals or indifferents. Among these indifferents are material wealth, fame, reputation, and even death. The Stoic's message is that because one cannot control these things, he should not make himself a slave to them by coveting them or compromising his character to achieve them.

The Stoics champion rational thought, which can only be consistently achieved by governing one's emotions. By refusing to be controlled by impulse, the Stoic is able to conduct pragmatic analysis and make rational decisions. Although these lessons are thousands of years old, the enduring nature of man allows the 21st century military professional to garner invaluable instruction from Stoic texts.

Stoic Lessons for the 21st Century Profession of Arms

Articulate your guiding principles

“An important place to begin in philosophy is this: a clear perception of one's own ruling principle.” Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.26.15¹⁴

Governing principles establish a foundational framework for the development of virtuous character and a moral life. These principles must be thought out, clearly articulated, and practiced on a daily basis. This is especially important in the military, where extended periods of adversity remove any false veneer to reveal the true self. Civil War veteran, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, succinctly articulated this sentiment when he said “combat makes good men better, and bad men worse.”¹⁵ In his book *Morality and War*, author David Fischer emphasizes the im-

portance of articulating and practicing virtuous principles, “If we are to stand any chance of acting rightly in the heat and passion of the moment, we need schooling in the virtues, so that we develop states of character that enables us to discern and to choose what is right, undeflected by passions or emotions.”¹⁶ Lord Moran, a World War I British physician, blended these sentiments when he wrote “Character...is a habit, the daily choice of right instead of wrong: it is a moral quality which grows to maturity in peace and is not suddenly developed at the outbreak of war. For war...has no power to transform, it merely exaggerates the good and evil that are in us, till it is plain for all to read.”¹⁷ Thus, the profession of arms recognizes, through hard earned experience, that the development of character is foundational to success in combat.

The Marine Corps has institutional principles in the form of core values, leadership principles, and leadership traits.¹⁸ Almost every commander provides amplifying guidance to his subordinates on what he expects of his Marines. While there is significant value in these principles, they are only partially sufficient because they are thrust upon the individual, rather than developed and internalized by him. The unfortunate result is that many of these organizational virtues are often treated like catchphrases, rather than acting as a governing force during everyday life. If ruling principles are to be effective, they must be genuinely accepted by the individual and embodied on a daily basis.

Major Doug Zembiec exemplified the power of a principled life. Zembiec was a Marine infantry officer who served in Kosovo and Iraq. His actions as a company commander during the 2004 first battle of Fallujah earned him the abiding admiration of his Marines and the moniker the “Lion of Fallujah.”¹⁹ In 2007, Doug Zembiec was killed in Baghdad during his second tour in Iraq. As his best friend combed through Zembiec’s journals to compose a eulogy, he

found a number of ideas, goals, and quotes that influenced the way Zembiec thought and lived.²⁰

One of the most powerful entries was a passage labeled “Principles My Father Taught Me”

Be a man of principle. Fight for what you believe in. Keep your word. Live with integrity. Be brave. Believe in something bigger than yourself. Serve your country. Teach. Mentor. Give something back to society. Lead from the front. Conquer your fears. Be a good friend. Be humble, but self-confident. Appreciate your friends and family. Be a leader, not a follower. Be valorous on the field of battle. Take responsibility for your actions.²¹

Zembiec was a man who articulated and embodied his principles. While his effectiveness as a leader may be immeasurable, the impact of his principled life on those around him is undeniable. Hundreds attended Zembiec’s funeral, including dozens of Marines who served with him in Iraq. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recounted when speaking of Zembiec’s impact, “Your men have to follow your orders; they don’t have to go to your funeral.”²²

Although Zembiec was a dedicated military officer, he did not allow his profession to completely consume him. He was also a family man, devoted to being a husband and father. In this role Zembiec again articulated his guiding principles to shape his thoughts and behavior: “I am an example-setting father that raises children who positively influence our nation, society, family and friends for generations. Our family name becomes synonymous with integrity, valor, character, commitment, spiritual/mental/physical toughness, leadership, charisma, and justice.”²³

Clearly articulated and practiced values – be they Marcus Aurelius’s justice, truth, temperance and fortitude, Zembiec’s “Principles My Father Taught Me,” the Marine Corps’ core values, or some other private constitution – serve as a guiding personal doctrine. They remind the individual who he is, what he believes in, who he aspires to be, and how he should interact with the world around him. Zembiec’s principled life was the living embodiment of an idea that Lord Moran wrote about decades earlier: “fortitude in war has its roots in morality...a man of character in peace becomes a man of courage in war.”²⁴ Such overt and lofty principles may

seem overstated during prosperous times, but become a guiding light when powerful stressors emerge.

Emotion is the enemy of reason

“Other vices affect our judgment, anger affects our sanity... There is no passion that is more frantic, more destructive to its own self; it is arrogant if successful, and frantic if it fails. Even when defeated it does not grow weary, but if chance places its foe beyond its reach, it turns its teeth against itself.” Seneca, *On Anger* 3.1²⁵

The Stoics malign any emotion that threatens to override rational thought. The most dangerous of these emotions is anger, which clouds judgment and prevents even the ablest of men from using their full faculties. Military professionals – more than individuals in other walks of life – are forced to overcome the potent effects of a wide range of emotions including anger and fear.

In his work of historical fiction, author Steven Pressfield chronicles the lives of several Spartan warriors shortly before the Persian invasion of Greece and the battle of Thermopylae. Pressfield relates a conversation between an experienced Spartan officer, Dienekes, and his young, unbloodied protégé, Alexandros. As they speak of future combat, which is inevitable, Dienekes reminds his pupil, “Remember what I told you about the house with many rooms. There are rooms we must not enter. Anger. Fear. Any passion which leads the mind toward that ‘possession’ which undoes men in war.”²⁶

As the story progresses, the narrator, Dienekes’ squire, recounts Dienekes’ unemotional workman-like approach to combat.

His was not, I could see now, the heroism of an Achilles. He was not a superman who waded invulnerably into the slaughter, single-handedly slaying the foe by myriads. He was just a man doing a job. A job whose primary attribute was self-restraint and self-

composure, not for his own sake, but for those whom he led by his example. A job whose objective could be boiled down to the single understatement, as he did at the Hot Gates on the morning he died, of performing the commonplace under uncommon place conditions.²⁷

While Pressfield's narrative provides an interesting fictional example of self-control under dire circumstances, avoiding debilitating emotion remains of paramount importance in everyday 21st century life, especially for leaders. Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden is one of the greatest athletic coaches of all time. His ten NCAA Division I national championships are unparalleled, but even more important to him is his record of developing young men of character who go on to lead successful lives. When recounting a lifetime of lessons in his book, *Wooden on Leadership*, Coach Wooden emphasizes the importance of maintaining rational thought by refusing to be controlled by emotion. He observes that, "good judgment, common sense, and reason all fly out the window when emotions kick down your door."²⁸ Wooden reminds his readers, "Intensity makes you stronger, emotionalism makes you weaker."²⁹

Just as anger can blur even the most intelligent man's senses, so too can unchecked fear cause people to lose control. The debilitating effects of fear, often brought on by the perceived imminence of injury or death, are well chronicled in a number of works, including John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, S.L.A. Marshall's *Men Against Fire*, and J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors*. In his account of World War I trench warfare, *The Anatomy of Courage*, Lord Moran explains the need to deprive death of its debilitating effects so that men could perform,

We simply could not afford to allow death to hover in the offing as the final mystery; it must be brought to earth and robbed of its disturbing influence, by rough gibes and the touch of ridicule. If it was firmly grasped like a nettle soon there was no sting left in it. As the odds shortened, and it became plain that death was to be the common lot, I thought less of its coming until at last I saw no cruelty in its approach.³⁰

Moran's ability to function despite the likelihood of injury or death embodies Marcus Aurelius's idea that "Not even death can bring terror to him who regards that alone as good

which comes in due season.”³¹ Aurelius reminds himself, “Hasten then to your appointed end and, throwing away idle hopes, come to your own aid...while it is in your power.”³² The Stoic’s realization that death comes to every man and that uncontrolled emotion would cloud, not enhance, his judgment allows him to focus his efforts in a meaningful manner.

In his seminal work, *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz echoes the necessity for self-control, which he defines as “the gift of keeping calm even under the greatest stress.”³³ Clausewitz advises that strong character assures the dominance of the intellect and allows for “the noblest pride...to act rationally at all times.”³⁴ The 21st century military professional conducts his duties in a realm where there can be significant consequences, including injury or death. While he will undoubtedly experience a wide range of powerful emotions in the performance of his duties, the Stoic lesson is that he must not allow himself to be so overcome by sentiment that he is unable to think and act rationally. Understanding the allure of emotion and cultivating the character and self-control that refuses to let impulse and passion rule is critical to functioning in the face of formidable challenges. The Stoic’s ability to conduct a rational analysis of his situation, understand what is within his power and what is beyond it, and focus his energies towards that which he can affect, allows him to thrive in an environment fraught with powerful emotional temptations.

Attitude is a choice

“A podium and a prison is each a place, one high and the other low, but in either place your freedom of choice can be maintained if you so wish.” Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.6.25³⁵

The Stoic philosophy teaches that regardless of the circumstances of a situation, one can always control his outlook. There is a passage in Epictetus’s *Enchiridion* that reads, “Everything has two handles, the one by which it may be borne, the other by which it may not.”³⁶ Epictetus’s

message that no matter how dire the situation, there is always a decision to be made reveals the immense power every person has over his own life. Every person makes hundreds of choices each day – how to approach a problem, how to treat people, and how to react to the circumstances they encounter. Marcus Aurelius realized both the complexity and the importance of this task and so he began each morning with an exhortation to himself, “[Today] I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil...I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him.”³⁷ Marcus Aurelius’s daily mantra reminds the Stoic that how one chooses to frame the world around him ultimately shapes his life.

One of the most powerful examples of choice comes from Victor Frankl, an Austrian physician of Jewish descent who was imprisoned in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. Frankl endured untold suffering – including starvation, the deaths of his parents, brother, and pregnant wife, and the imminent threat of his own death – but he refused to be overwhelmed.³⁸ Instead, Frankl made a conscious choice to “preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.”³⁹ From his experience Frankl determined that “everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”⁴⁰ Frankl’s story demonstrates the power of choice, even in the direst of situations.

General James Mattis offers a more recent example of the power of perception and choice. In a 2014 speech at the Marines Memorial Hotel in San Francisco, Mattis took on the popular culture notions of post-traumatic stress that pervade society and the media. He began by

talking about the power of expectations and that if veterans are told often enough that there is something wrong with them, they may themselves begin to believe it, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁴¹ Mattis cautioned against this, stating that the culture of self pity and victimhood, which is sometimes exalted in America, is not something veterans should partake in.⁴² Mattis offered an alternative way of viewing the challenges and consequences of combat: “There is also something called post-traumatic growth, where you come out of a situation like that, and you actually feel kinder toward your fellow man and fellow woman. That you are actually a better husband and father. You actually have a closer relationship with your God. You do not have to go around apologizing if there is some rage in you.”⁴³

In his 2011 book, *Flourish*, Doctor Martin Seligman addresses the concept of post-traumatic growth. In his chapter on turning trauma into growth, he talks about understanding post-traumatic stress, its causes, its indicators, and the impacts of incentivizing behavior.⁴⁴ He goes on to describe the theory of post-traumatic growth. Seligman explains that shortly after trauma many people display negative symptoms, but if they are taught the appropriate coping skills ahead of time, they can grow, and in the long run achieve a higher relative level of psychological functioning.⁴⁵ In Seligman’s model, inoculation to stress and resilience rely on a commonsense approach that emphasizes education and perception, which empower the individual to cope with trauma.⁴⁶

While it is indisputable that some service members suffer from debilitating post-traumatic stress resulting from psychological and biological factors beyond their control; the scope, scale, and prevalence of post-traumatic stress is potentially influenced by the attitude with which people approach it. As US Army Colonel H. R. McMaster wrote on the power of perception, “Soldiers must view war as a challenge and their duty, not as trauma.”⁴⁷

Epictetus tells his readers that “It isn’t the things themselves that disturb people, but the judgments that they form about them.”⁴⁸ Steven R. Covey, the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, echoes Epictetus’s sentiment when he writes, “It is not what others do or even our own mistakes that hurt us the most; it is our response to those things.”⁴⁹ All people face challenges on a daily basis; those in the profession of arms often encounter trials that have greater consequences than many of their civilian counterparts will ever have to face. Great minds across millennia, from Epictetus to Frankl, teach those prudent enough to grasp their wisdom that challenge, hardship, and suffering are inevitable, but there is always a choice to be made. Today’s military professionals must make hundreds of decisions a day that will shape the way they perceive and interact with the world. The powerful and far-reaching impacts of these perceptions are captured in an old adage that highlights the critical importance of one’s attitude,

Sow a thought, reap an action;
sow an action, reap a habit;
sow a habit, reap a character;
sow a character, reap a destiny.⁵⁰

Education is the foundation for rational thought

“Always striving for true education is the best insurance against losing your bearings, your perspective, in the face of disaster, in the face of failure.” Admiral James Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*⁵¹

The Stoics placed great emphasis on a liberal education, which promoted a broader understanding of the world and enabled flexibility of mind. This educational process was a lifelong endeavor in which there were no shortcuts. Epictetus warns against treating education as an ornament to be publicly displayed, writing, “Those who receive the bare theories immediately want to spew them, as an upset stomach does its food.”⁵² He advises instead that the student take time

to ruminate on the merits and flaws of his schooling and, “after you’ve digested them, show us the changes in your reasoned choices, just like the shoulders of gymnasts display their diet and training, and as the craft of artisans show in what they’ve learned.”⁵³ Likewise, Marcus Aurelius reminds himself “not to be satisfied with a superficial understanding,”⁵⁴ and writes that “nothing so promotes elevation of mind as the ability to examine methodically and truly every object that is presented to you in life.”⁵⁵

The Stoics’ value of education is rooted in their understanding that the world is an unfair place that presents challenges too numerous and complex to lend themselves to simple solutions. As a teacher, Epictetus’s goal was to develop his students’ minds in ways that enabled them to think critically and adapt to the changing circumstances that the world presented them. In his *Discourses* Epictetus professes, “You must understand how laughable it is to say, ‘Tell me what to do!’ What advice could I possibly give? No, a far better request is, ‘Train my mind to adapt to any circumstance.’...In this way, if circumstances take you off script...you won’t be desperate for a new prompting.”⁵⁶ Though separated by two-thousand years, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP-1) *Warfighting* echoes Epictetus’s thoughts on judgment: “Decision making requires both the situational awareness to recognize the essence of a given problem and the creative ability to devise a practical solution. These abilities are the products of experience, education, and intelligence.”⁵⁷

The modern roots of MCDP-1 *Warfighting*’s emphasis on a broad education to develop judgment result in part from the military educational reforms of the early nineteenth century. In 1806, the army of Napoleon Bonaparte defeated the Prussian Army at the battle of Jena-Auerstadt. Following their defeat the Prussian military reform commission, led by General Gerhard Scharnhorst, implemented dozens of modifications which seriously altered the way the Prussian

army prepared for and conducted war.⁵⁸ The most important and enduring reform revolved around education and the Enlightenment concept of *bildung*. The notion of *bildung* refers to the lifelong development of character and intellect through education and experience.⁵⁹ Scharnhorst reformed an officer education system that had previously relied on drill and technical training for wealthy aristocratic officers into a system that focused on liberal education in both the art and science of warfare, which prepared officers to think, decide, and act in the fog of war.⁶⁰ Echoing Epictetus's sentiment on the unpredictable nature of the future and the need for a flexible mind, Scharnhorst stated that "without judgment, all knowledge is of no use to the officer, since he must never act according to a certain standard, but rather according to the particular circumstances."⁶¹

The direct impacts of Scharnhorst's emphasis on *bildung* can be seen in the life and work of one of his pupils, Carl von Clausewitz. Clausewitz initially struggled with Scharnhorst's challenging curriculum at the Berlin Institute for Young Officers and was near despair because he lacked the necessary prerequisite knowledge.⁶² The kindness, empathy, and mentorship Scharnhorst displayed towards Clausewitz allowed the latter to grow into a brilliant soldier-scholar.⁶³ In his seminal treatise, *On War*, Clausewitz echoes Scharnhorst's concept of *bildung* as he writes of developing military genius through the harmonious combination of intellect and temperament.⁶⁴ Clausewitz notes that these attributes must be matured through a lifetime of study and experience in order to develop a calm and inquiring mind capable of a broad comprehensive approach to war.⁶⁵ To this educated and experienced leader, Clausewitz writes, a nation should entrust "the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country."⁶⁶

Both the Stoic philosophy and the profession of arms prize the ability to conduct pragmatic analysis and develop innovative solutions to solve complex problems. This sort of adaptation is made possible by developing leaders' minds through continuous education and intellectual trials. Although education remains a cornerstone in the 21st century profession of arms, the genuine student must not be satisfied with only the instruction that is required for continued promotion. True professionals must understand that the lifelong development of character and intellect requires a rigorous program of self-study, which develops the mental and moral capacity to succeed in the most chaotic of situations. No matter how educated and capable the military professional becomes, he must retain the humility to realize that there is always more to be learned. As students of the profession of arms cultivate their character and intellect, they have a duty to spread the pursuit of *bildung* on to the next generation of military professionals.

Learn from your mistakes

“I will keep constant watch over myself and - most usefully - will put each day up for review. For this is what makes us evil - that none of us looks back upon our own lives. We reflect upon only that which we are about to do. And yet our plans for the future descend from the past.”
Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 83.2⁶⁷

While the continuous development of character and intellect are foundational to the Stoics, it is important to remember that this education came not only from a sterile classroom, but also from personal experience. Seneca's admonishment to put each day up for review shows the wisdom in learning from one's own successes and mistakes. Too often individuals and organizations fail to conduct a meaningful and pragmatic analysis of events to discern precious lessons from their experiences. An inability to learn from previous experience inclines individuals and

organizations to repeat mistakes. In the profession of arms this often means the needless loss of life.

British Field Marshal Viscount William Slim provides an invaluable historical example of learning from one's mistakes. In December 1941, Japan attacked not only Pearl Harbor, but also struck south and west to seize European colonies in Indochina, Malaysia, Singapore, and Burma. At the time, Slim commanded the Burma Corps, which was pummeled by the Japanese advance. Slim's position was not an enviable one: he had only recently transferred from commanding a division in Iraq, the British preoccupation with the North African and European theaters left him with few resources, and the forces he inherited were ill prepared for the Japanese onslaught.⁶⁸ By the time Slim's Corps limped back to British India they had suffered more than 13,000 dead, wounded, or missing.⁶⁹ Slim's prospects were dim. His Corps was in shambles and he knew that he would not receive additional resources, but would instead have to rebuild his unit and attack with what he had. It would have been easy for him to spend time criticizing his predecessors, faulting his government, or cursing the impossibility of the situation.

Slim did none of this. Instead he admitted that he had been bested by the Japanese and he resolved to learn valuable lessons that would inform him as he rebuilt and attacked. In his 1956 memoir *Defeat Into Victory*, Slim recounts, "In preparation, in execution, in strategy, and in tactics we had been worsted, and we had paid the penalty - defeat. Defeat is bitter."⁷⁰ He writes of the demoralizing effect of defeat on the common soldier, but notes that the soldier could find refuge in the fact that he had fought valiantly and had done his duty faithfully.⁷¹ For a general, such as Slim, there was no refuge. Victory was his duty, and he had failed.⁷² As he examines his actions he recounts fated decisions, missed opportunities, and the impacts of fear, uncertainty, and hesitation. Slim writes of himself as a defeated commander who was down but not out,

In a dark hour he will turn in upon himself and question the very foundations of his leadership and his manhood. And then he must stop! For, if he is ever to command in battle again, he must shake off these regrets, and stamp on them, as they claw at this will and his self-confidence. He must beat off these attacks he delivers against himself, and cast out the doubts born of failure. Forget them, and remember only the lessons to be learnt from defeat - they are more than from victory.⁷³

Through his relentless and humbling self-critique Slim derives cogent lessons, but does not allow emotion to overwhelm him. In this way, he demonstrates the value of reflection and why Stoic philosophy prizes the ability to learn from mistakes and move forward. Military professionals face disappointments and defeat, some minuscule others great, on a frequent basis. The Stoic lesson is that how professionals deal with the mistakes of their past has significant implications for their chances of future success.

Be a team player

“We are made especially for the sake of one another.” Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8.56⁷⁴

The Stoic themes to eschew those things beyond one’s control and avoid the undermining effects of emotion may cause the reader to deduce that the Stoics advocate a sort of withdrawal from social interaction to minimize vulnerability. This is not true; instead the Stoics recognize the interdependence of men and the corresponding necessity to rely on one another. Marcus Aurelius characterizes the symbiotic relationship of men as “born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower.”⁷⁵ This lesson on interdependence rings especially true in the profession of arms, where no individual is capable of performing all things necessary to succeed, but instead functions as a contributing member of a larger team.

Throughout his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius speaks of the importance of the subordination of self for the good of the team. In one passage, he writes, “Have I done something for the general interest? Well then I have had my reward.”⁷⁶ Aurelius’s exhortation echoes a sentiment

often heard in military circles – it is incredible what you can accomplish when no one cares who gets the credit. In his *Enchiridion*, Epictetus offers lessons on the importance of teamwork when he states, “What you avoid suffering, do not attempt to make others suffer.”⁷⁷ Epictetus’s sentiment paraphrases the golden rule – treat others as you wish to be treated – which many view as foundational to forming a cohesive team.

Unsurprisingly Coach John Wooden provides a number of lessons on being a team player in his memoirs. Wooden writes of the pinnacle of an effective team, that manifests itself in the form of a selfless team spirit, which he describes as “an eagerness to sacrifice personal interests or glory for the welfare of all.”⁷⁸ In Wooden’s experience this force becomes transformative as “members are totally committed to working at their highest levels for the good of the group.”⁷⁹ Wooden describes the traits of such team players as “unselfish, considerate, and put[ting] the goals of the organization above their own, even at the expense of their own personal desires.”⁸⁰

Admiral James Stockdale was a US Navy fighter pilot who spent eight years as a North Vietnamese prisoner of war (POW). Prior to his service in Vietnam, Stockdale completed graduate coursework at Stanford University. While matriculating, a professor introduced Stockdale to Stoic philosophy and gave him a copy of Epictetus’s *Enchiridion*.⁸¹ On September 9, 1965 Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam.⁸² As he floated to the earth beneath his parachute, he muttered to himself, “I’m leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.”⁸³ Reflecting on his time as a prisoner of war, Stockdale concluded, “From this eight-year experience, I distilled one all-purpose idea, plus a few corollaries. It is a simple idea, an idea as old as the scriptures...It violates the idea of Adam Smith’s invisible hand, our ideas of human nature, and probably the second law of thermodynamics. That idea is you are your brother’s keeper.”⁸⁴

By 1969 Stockdale had endured internment for four years. Like his fellow prisoners, he was tortured numerous times, but as the senior American officer captive he often received extra attention from his captors, sometimes spending weeks in isolation or locked in leg irons.⁸⁵ On one occasion as Stockdale returned to his cell after an absence of several weeks his POW neighbor, knowing his fragile mental state, risked torture by passing a note to share his courage with his shaken teammate. On a low-grade paper-towel was a message written in rat droppings. It was the last verse of Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate.
I am the captain of my soul.⁸⁶

This noble act encouraged Stockdale when he was physically, mentally, and morally exhausted. The concept of selflessness is peppered throughout Stoic texts. As members of a liberal society that champions individual rights, the subordination of self for the greater good is in many ways a unique requirement for members of the profession of arms. While the Stoics continuously advocate for self-mastery and the shunning of externals, they simultaneously recognize the interdependence of men and the resulting need for cooperation and teamwork. The Stoics' recognition that simple acts of selflessness are foundational in building powerful teams provides an enduring lesson for the profession of arms.

Spend your time wisely

“Since it is possible that you might depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly.” Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.11⁸⁷

Death and its implications are never far from the Stoic philosophy. Marcus Aurelius writes that “a limit of time is fixed for you,”⁸⁸ while Epictetus puts it a little more bluntly when

he tells his students, “You are a little soul carrying around a dead body.”⁸⁹ The point that both men emphasize is that time is a man’s most precious resource, and he should think carefully about how he spends it. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius reminds himself to ensure that he does not allow ancillary issues to consume him: “It is essential of you to remember that the attention you give to any action should be in due proportion to its worth, for then you won’t tire and give up.”⁹⁰

In *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, author Greg McKeown relays a similar sentiment about the importance of the effective use of man’s most precious asset – time. He cautions his readers, “If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.”⁹¹ McKeown advocates for individuals to exercise the power that they have over their own lives, reminding them that “The ability to choose cannot be taken away or even given away – it can only be forgotten.”⁹² This advice, like many great ideas, sounds relatively simple in concept but becomes difficult in execution. There are many small demands made on an individual which he must ruthlessly cull in order to protect his time. The pace of life often detracts from one’s ability to simply stop and think. This sort of reflection and introspective analysis is critical to thoughtful decision making. As McKeown writes, “In order to have focus, we need to escape to focus.”⁹³ This wisdom provides insight not only on daily time management, but also on the power of reflection, and on setting a course for life. In other words, life is short, spend your time wisely.

While many people espouse the sentiment live each day like it is your last, few spend time contemplating its true implications, and even fewer make the sacrifices required to fulfill its spirit. Pat Tillman provides an example of a man who demonstrated genuine introspection of what he was doing with his life, what principles meant something to him, and what the implications were. In 2001 Tillman was the starting Safety for the National Football League’s Arizona

Cardinals. His football career was rising, he had a loving wife, and he had a potential life of celebrity and luxury ahead of him. As his wife Marie put it, “Pat could have played for years, retired, then golfed for the rest of his life. But I knew he was never going to do that.”⁹⁴

The events of September 11th caused Tillman to question what he was doing with his life and what his contributions to society were. He made a habit of collecting his thoughts in a journal and on April 8, 2002 made an entry labeled “Decision.”⁹⁵ In it Tillman cataloged an honest introspective assessment: “My life at this point is relatively easy...my job is challenging, enjoyable, and strokes my vanity enough to fool me into thinking it’s important.”⁹⁶ Tillman goes on to describe the things that bring him happiness, but ultimately concludes that “it is not enough,” in light of “these last few years, and especially after recent events, I’ve come to appreciate just how shallow and insignificant my role is. I’m no longer satisfied with the path I’ve been following...it’s no longer important.”⁹⁷ Tillman ends the entry with the admonition “My voice is calling me in a different direction. It is up to me whether or not to listen.”⁹⁸

In 2002 at age 25 and in the prime of his career, Pat Tillman quietly walked away from the wealth and fame of the National Football League to enlist in the US Army. He did so anonymously and without fanfare. Pat Tillman and his younger brother Kevin went on to serve with the 75th Ranger Regiment in both Iraq and in Afghanistan. Tillman’s thoughtful analysis continued throughout his time in the Army. In his journal, he questioned the validity of his decision, the impacts of his actions on those he loved, and the motivations of his country for beginning the war in Iraq.⁹⁹ On April 22, 2004, Tillman was killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of Tillman’s death, much of the focus was on the disgraceful attempted cover-up by the US government, rather than on the man of character who conducted introspective analysis, made a courageous choice, and acted. Pat Tillman provides a compelling example of someone who

realized that his time was limited and made a difficult decision to do something with his life that he believed carried a greater meaning.

Many people treat life as a current that pushes them along. They avoid asking themselves hard questions about what is important to them, what they should do with their limited time, what their goals are, and what their legacy will be. Tillman's introspection and his courageous decision provide a powerful example of the Stoic's lesson in the pursuit of a purposeful life. Each man's time is limited; he should spend it doing something he finds meaningful.

Endure

"Courage is endurance of the Soul." Admiral James Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*¹⁰⁰

Admiral Stockdale's thoughts on the will to endure highlight the Stoic quest to cultivate the strength of mind, body, and spirit to overcome the inevitable challenges that life presents. Ruminating on the obscurities of the future, the Stoic philosopher Seneca writes that any rational man would prefer to be free from torture, war, and illness.¹⁰¹ However if these trials do befall him, the wise man would not wish them away, but seek "the virtue that makes adversities bearable."¹⁰² Life, and the profession of arms particularly, presents many challenges that the individual must overcome.

One incredible example of the will to endure comes from Jan Baalsrud, a Norwegian commando in World War II. In March 1943, Baalsrud and three other Norwegian commandos sailed from Great Britain to Norway with the goal of establishing themselves ashore and fomenting armed resistance against the Nazis.¹⁰³ Their plan went awry from the start. The commandos

were betrayed by a Norwegian informant, their ship was attacked by German forces while at anchor, and with the exception of Baalsrud the entire team was killed or captured.¹⁰⁴ Baalsrud, who was shot in his escape, spent the next nine weeks evading German forces and attempting to make it to the border of neutral Sweden.

After swimming through arctic waters to escape his pursuers, Baalsrud traveled overland for several days through a snowstorm until he was buried by an avalanche.¹⁰⁵ Severely injured and snow blind he stumbled into a village and was assisted by a local man.¹⁰⁶ Baalsrud's host, with several other men, lashed the frost-bitten commando to a sled up and dragged him up a mountain to a plateau, where other resistance members planned to rally and continue the journey to Sweden.¹⁰⁷ Through a miscommunication, the immobile Baalsrud was stranded on the plateau for 27 days.¹⁰⁸ Alone, unable to walk, buried in snow, and with little sustenance, he willed himself to live. Although Baalsrud contemplated suicide, he found the courage to endure. Eventually, Baalsrud was recovered and moved to a small cave where he had limited shelter. His ordeal continued as he was forced to cut off nine of his frostbitten toes with a pocket knife to prevent the spread of gangrene.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately the resistance members made arrangements for nomadic reindeer herders to drag Baalsrud on a sled through the arctic wilderness to neutral Sweden. Throughout his nine-week ordeal, Baalsrud withstood indescribable pain, persistent danger, and the constant threat of death as he traveled more than 350 miles to safety. Although the odds were overwhelmingly against his survival, he endured.

While Baalsrud's case is an extreme example, the will to endure is a familiar theme to the military professional. Much of military training focuses on the physical elements of endurance, but the mental and moral aspects are equally important. In *On War*, Clausewitz writes of the

challenges of will faced by commanders as they work toward developing and implementing effective strategy. Clausewitz explains the great endurance of will required: “Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is very easy...great strength of character, as well as great lucidity and firmness of mind is required in order to follow through steadily, to carry out the plan, and not to be thrown off course by thousands of diversions.”¹¹⁰ Clausewitz goes on to explain that strategic decisions, typically made far removed from physical danger, are usually more difficult to make than tactical decisions under fire. He writes, “It sounds odd, but...it takes more strength of will to make an important decision in strategy than in tactics. In the latter, one is carried away by the pressures of the moment, caught up in a maelstrom where resistance would be fatal...one presses boldly on. In strategy, the pace is much slower. There is ample room for apprehensions, one’s own and those of others.”¹¹¹ Clausewitz’s insights provide another perspective on the many facets of will and the critical role that it plays in the profession of arms.

The quest to develop this mental, moral, and physical will to endure, what Ernest Henley termed the unconquerable soul, is a never-ending process. The famed British author Rudyard Kipling articulates the challenge pointedly in a stanza from his poem ‘*If*,’

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’

Kipling’s exhortation to push one’s mind and body beyond their perceived capacity is a concept that quickly becomes familiar to those in the profession of arms. From their first days of entry-level training, aspiring Marines are forced to endure challenges that likely dwarf any previously encountered in life. The resilience demanded includes not only physical fortitude, but also the ability to endure long separations from loved ones, survive periods of danger and monotony,

and deal with the unknown. These challenges of endurance only grow in scope, scale, and complexity as the individual progresses professionally. As the military professional meets the evolving challenges of endurance, he will be well served by Stoic lessons that teach him to approach these trials with strong character, a positive attitude, and a rational mind.

Leaders are teachers

“Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them then or bear with them.” Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 8.59¹¹²

No one is born with innate qualities required to succeed in this world, especially in a realm as demanding as the profession of arms. If young Marines are to mature and thrive, they require mentorship and consistent guidance from those who have gone before them. Providing this education is a daunting task for anyone, especially when the young mentors are scarcely older than their protégés. The Stoic philosophy recognizes this challenge and places a critical emphasis on learning, leading, and teaching. Marcus Aurelius opens his *Meditations* by recalling his mentors by name and cataloging the lessons that they imparted to him.¹¹³ As his writing progresses Aurelius alludes to the challenge of mentoring, and writes of the compassion and patience required: “If they’ve made a mistake, correct them gently and show them where they went wrong. If you can’t do that, then the blame lies with you.”¹¹⁴

The 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Major General John A. Lejeune, expresses sentiment similar to that of Marcus Aurelius as he articulates the vital role of mentorship in the *Marine Corps Manual of 1921*. Lejeune emphasizes that “The relation between officers and enlisted men should in no sense be that of superior and inferior nor that of master and servant, but rather that of teacher and scholar. In fact, it should partake of the nature of the relation between

father and son.”¹¹⁵ As the complexity of the Marine Corps mission evolves and responsibility and authority are delegated further down the chain of command, this mentorship responsibility falls not only to officers as Lejeune articulates, but increasingly to young noncommissioned officers.

John Wooden, who spent more than 50 years coaching young men, also emphasizes the importance of teaching when he writes “effective leaders are, first and foremost, good teachers.”¹¹⁶ Wooden echoes Lejeune’s thoughts on the paternal relationship of teacher and student when he writes, “A leader in sports, business, or any other field of endeavor should possess and provide the same qualities inherent in a good parent: character, consistency, dependability, accountability, knowledge, good judgment, selflessness, respect, courage, discipline, fairness, and structure.”¹¹⁷ Wooden’s clear-eyed approach echoes the Stoic sentiment not only of the importance of teaching, but the emotional control and self-mastery required to be an effective teacher.

In his memoir *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*, Eugene Sledge vividly recalls his experiences as a Marine in the Pacific theater of World War II. At multiple points in the narrative Sledge relays the critical role that mentors, often scarcely older than he, played in his preparation for and survival of combat. In training at Camp Elliot, Sledge recalls the sturdy professionalism of his combat veteran instructors as they explain the intricacies of the weapons, tactics, and fortitude required to triumph over the Japanese.¹¹⁸ Sledge notes that there was no condescension or hazing, only professional instruction in the skills that the Marines’ lives would soon depend on.¹¹⁹ As Sledge moves into the Pacific he arrives on the island of Pavuvu for additional training and receives new mentors. Again, he remembers them as men who had recently experienced the specter of combat and had no interest in degrading their students, but instead spent

every available minute preparing them for the trials to come. Years later Sledge still writes appreciatively of the large Marine Raider who taught him bayonet fighting, the deep regard he felt for his eccentric Gunnery Sergeant who embodied the “Old Breed,” and his admiration for his unassuming but skilled company commander who would later be killed in action.¹²⁰ All of these men shaped Sledge and helped to imbue him with the mental and physical skills that allowed him to survive the trial of combat.

While the critical role of mentorship cannot be overstated, being an effective teacher is easier said than done. Most service members, especially those forward filling many of the most dangerous roles, are often adolescents recently removed from the familiar surroundings of their homes and thrust into trying situations that may have life and death consequences for themselves, their friends, or innocents around them. The steep learning curve required to be successful demands that those who went before teach those only marginally junior to them. Continuous mentorship by leaders at every level plays a critical role in developing and sustaining the next generation of Marines. This requires a selfless devotion to the good of the group and an understanding that leaders have a moral obligation to take what they have learned and pay it forward to the next generation.

Implications and Conclusion

Stoic wisdom provides a model for the 21st century profession of arms to apply to an evolving but enduringly human world of conflict. The benefits of virtuous character, freedom from externals, and rational thought are all of incalculable value to both the individual and the

collective team. The judicious application of these Stoic values empowers the 21st century military professional to meet the many challenges of life, both minuscule and cataclysmic, with the confidence and strength of a wise man.

In seeking to promote the Stoic philosophy, the profession of arms must be careful not to corrupt it and in the process, alienate potential students. No mandatory training, annual computer module, or PowerPoint presentation will ever be able to convey the potential of Stoicism. For the profession of arms to benefit from the lessons of Stoic philosophy, individuals must make an active personal decision about the merits of the philosophy and its applicability to their life. To expose students to Stoicism, Stoic works of literature should appear on professional reading lists. Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* and Epictetus's *Enchiridion* are concise, direct, and insightful. There are numerous contemporary works, including Ronald Pies' *Everything Has Two Handles*, Admiral James Stockdale's *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, and Nancy Sherman's *Stoic Warriors*, which are interesting and relevant. Although philosophical texts may not conform to the traditional notions of professional military reading, they nonetheless provide invaluable insight for the profession of arms by exposing military professionals to a range of historical perspectives.

If the profession of arms seeks diversity of thought, it must expose its adherents to a variety of intellectual works. Exposure to Stoic texts will provide the reader with perspectives on life's challenges, ancient and contemporary, and how others approached these ordeals. It will enable the reader to identify Stoic themes in other works of literature and relate them back to both their personal life and the profession of arms. The resulting deeper understanding of human nature will assist in developing the wisdom and fortitude to overcome life's inevitable trials and tribulations. While the character of warfare evolves and the problems faced by the profession of

arms are in some ways increasingly complex, there are enduring human elements that are timeless. The Stoic philosophy provides valuable lessons in character, intellect, and leadership in a world where there is no moral economy. No history book or list of maxims will provide today's military professional with penetrating answers to all of his complex problems, but historical knowledge in the form of Stoic thought can light what is often a dark path.¹²¹

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