

Helping Marines to “Stay Green”

Commander support for MCMAP

by Maj Brian A. Kerg

In accordance with *Marine Corps Order 1500.59 (MCO 1500.59)*, the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) “contributes to the mental, character, and physical development of Marines” that further develops “the Marine ethos in a progressive manner throughout a Marine’s career.”¹ The concept of operations of this order states that minimum MCMAP requirements should not limit commanders but rather encourage them to “conduct additional MCMAP training in a progressive, safe manner to enhance unit performance and fitness levels of Marines.”²

However, many commanders remain reluctant to fully support MCMAP and meet the intent stated in *MCO 1500.59* because of misperceptions regarding MCMAP’s safety, utility, and affordability. First, there is a misperception

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that MCMAP is unsafe and will unduly put Marines at risk, subsequently creating risk to a command’s mission. Second, many commanders are not aware of the profound effect of this program on the individual Marine’s morale and commitment to mission. Finally, there is generally little understanding about how affordable it is to build and maintain a robust cadre of Martial Arts Instructors (MAI) and Martial Arts Instructor Trainers (MAIT) within any unit.

Brief quantitative and qualitative analyses of MCMAP can correct

these misperceptions. An examination of safety data provided by the Naval Safety Center’s Web Enabled Safety System (WESS) reveals that MCMAP is perhaps one of the safest activities in which Marines can participate. Further, MCMAP can pay unquantifiable dividends in the productivity, proficiency, and conduct of Marines. Finally, MCMAP costs next to nothing for leaders to implement. The aim of this article is to better inform commanders regarding the safety, utility, and affordability of MCMAP so they are empowered to capitalize on the benefits of this program for their commands while helping their Marines “stay green” by leveraging MCMAP.

The Safest Training Activity in Your Command

“One of my top performers got hurt doing MCMAP right before a deployment, and he got stuck with the Remain Behind Element (RBE)!” “I sprained an ankle doing MCMAP at boot camp and was left to rot in Medical Recovery Platoon (MRP) for what felt like years.” “My buddy tore his ACL doing MCMAP at flight school and had to wait another three months before he got back into the training pipeline.” The anecdotes are many and varied, but they all follow the same narrative arc: MCMAP caused an injury, and Marines and their units paid for it. These stories resonate with commanders, and understandably so, for it is their responsibility to manage the competing priorities that affect mission accomplishment and troop welfare. The crux of this management is found with the decision of what risk to assume, and what risk to wave off. The very nature of MCMAP means whether a commander



MCMAP is one of the safest activities in which Marines participate. (Photo by LCpl Andrew Cortez.)

supports it to the letter or the spirit of *MCO 1500.59* becomes a risk decision. If this inherently violent program carries more risk than its worth, why support it?

The reverse is true: MCMAP is one of the safest training activities a commander can sponsor. A compilation of all Marine Corps injuries reported via WESS in 2015 shows that of 9,749 injuries, only 165 occurred during MCMAP training.³ In comparison, 1,422 occurred during team sport activities, 1,092 occurred during motorcycle riding, and 1,066 occurred while driving a four-wheeled vehicle. If sources of injury are lumped into descriptive categories, combatives (which includes MCMAP) rank only at eleventh in terms of sources of injury. MCMAP's safety becomes even more impressive when looking at each activity individually. Team-based athletics, broken down by sport, show 543 Marines were injured playing basketball, 510 while playing football, and 199 while playing baseball.⁴ The takeaway is clear: Marines perform dozens of other activities that are command-sponsored every single day that cause exponentially more injuries than MCMAP, yet many leaders incorrectly believe that MCMAP causes a disproportionate number of training-related injuries. It is, in fact, one of the safest command-sponsored activities in which Marines can participate!

So why is MCMAP singled out in this way? There are two key reasons. Its earlier iterations are partly to blame, as many of the safety measures in place today did not exist when MCMAP was launched in 2001.⁵ Secondly, the visceral nature of martial arts related injuries makes them quite easy to recall and share, causing many leaders to inappropriately employ heuristics and fall victim to memory bias.

Some techniques, as performed at MCMAP's inception, were high risk. Other training methods, in hindsight, look as though they were designed to injure rather than to inoculate. Perhaps the most infamous training method was "Body Hardening," wherein students would take turns striking one another at selected points of the body, with the intent of hardening that point by dull-

ing the nerves and otherwise inoculating the Marine to the pain felt from the blow. This method was removed in 2011 "due to its limited effectiveness and tendency to cause injury when improperly conducted."⁶ Though far from perfect at its inception, MCMAP has evolved as new safety data became available.

Such issues were compounded when the earlier versions of MCMAP were experienced by Marines in entry-level training such as boot camp, Officer

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Candidates School, or TBS, when hundreds of personnel were simultaneously compelled to perform these techniques at the rapid rate with a very low instructor-to-student ratio. This is hardly the ideal way to provide any form of instruction, let alone MCMAP; the current requirement of a 1:12 instructor-to-student ratio accounts for this disparity.⁷ Again, with the emergence of new data, the program has changed to better accommodate Marines and the missions they support.

Today, MCMAP includes many more safeguards than in the past, and the program has a proven track record for safety with the WESS. Commanders are encouraged to look at the comprehensive safety data to make informed training choices. MCMAP is the one of the safest activities commanders can support.

The Fiscally Challenged Commander's Greatest Tool for Sustaining the Transformation

Commanders across the Corps face many challenges when managing morale and *esprit de corps*. Many Marines complete their entry-level training riding the high point of a wave of motivation and are ready to face the challenges and accomplish the goals that led them to enlist in the first place. However, the realities of daily life in the Fleet Marine Force can make it a challenge for Marines to maintain this same level of

enthusiasm. We may have signed up to make the world safe for democracy or to win the war on terrorism, but we find ourselves in an endless stream of working parties and safety stand-downs. Marines were promised the life of a warfighter and were charged to be responsible wielders of controlled violence on behalf of their Nation, yet our martial spirit often takes a back seat to the needs of the daily grind.

But nearly any Marine will find his well of motivation refilled when given the opportunity to do something they perceive as martial, no matter their occupational field. The easiest way to validate this is to ask your Marines how many of them would go to jump school, dive school, assault climber's course, or any other number of the Corps' premier courses that teach a martial or expeditionary skill. These are the types of challenges that Marines crave, but commanders often lack the resources to enable many of their Marines to participate in such courses. Commanders spending their own funds must be frugal and selective—if their unit only requires two assault climbers, they will likely only be able to pay to create two assault climbers.

MCMAP feeds and rekindles the warrior ethos and is quite affordable from the commander's perspective. The Marine Corps order on MCMAP captures this clearly in the commander's intent, which states this program "contributes to the mental, character and physical development of Marines" and helps with warrior development across the Marine's career.⁸ When afforded the opportunity to train in martial arts techniques, it is best to apply these techniques against live opponents in sparring matches while integrating combat conditioning, mental and character tie-ins, and warrior studies to revitalize Marines with martial zeal. The cross-dimensional benefits to physical fitness activities during working hours, including increases in performance and innovation, are well documented.⁹ More specifically, other studies demonstrated a statistically significant increase in life satisfaction and on-the-job innovation among martial arts practitioners.¹⁰ These studies only reinforce what many



Involvement in fundamental training is satisfying and rewarding. (Photo by LCpl Andrew Cortez.)

MAI/Ts and MCMAP enthusiasts can attest to: when a Marine gets to step away from the “day job” aspect of his duties and get immersed in the fundamentals of Marine Corps training that develops him physically, mentally, and morally, he is satisfied and motivated; he remembers why he joined the Marine Corps and is shown that his leadership wants him to stay green. This inevitably leads to greater proficiency and better conduct. We reach an inevitable and circular conclusion: training Marines in basic Marine things makes better Marines.

Regarding feasibility, commanders do not have to invest a dime to make a MAI. The MAIT is a walking schoolhouse. Certified and current MAITs exist in order to run organic MAI courses at their home base or station, and though a commander may not have a MAIT of his own, someone on that base or station certainly does. As every MAI course run by a MAIT must be submitted to the MACE, one phone call to the MACE can allow leaders to discover every MAI course being run on their base, and follow-on coordination with the chief instructor of that course can get their Marine a free seat. Truly, commanders must only give up a Marine for three weeks in order to create another MAI. Further, if they want to create their own MAIT in order

to generate more MAIs on their own initiative, they can send their MAI to the seven-week MAIT course, which is Training and Education Command funded. Their new MAIT then becomes the seed-corn with which they can grow more MAIs, spread them across their unit, and allow every platoon or section to run MCMAP on a regular basis. MCMAP is, perhaps, the greatest tool commanders have to sustain the transformation of their personnel from civilians to Marines by nurturing the warrior ethos. It is also the cheapest in that it is effectively free of charge to the unit, if leaders plan appropriately.

Help Them Stay Green: Support MCMAP In Your Command

Marine want to do “Marine stuff.” It is why they joined the Marine Corps! Commanders should feed this hunger any way they can, and MCMAP is the safest, most feasible, and demonstrably beneficial way they can develop their Marines physically, mentally, and morally. MCMAP is one of the safest activities Marines can perform under the command’s cognizance and is orders of magnitude less injurious than training, recreational, and required activities Marines perform every day across the Fleet Marine Force. It is one of the cheapest formal training programs commanders can build and maintain. Finally, it

reinvigorates the warrior ethos in every Marine, leading to increases in proficiency, conduct, and life satisfaction.

Commanders who foster active MCMAP programs at their units will see a notable increase in the thoroughness with which Marines accomplish the mission and will develop healthy, motivated, combat-ready Marines. Help your Marines stay green! Build and maintain a robust MCMAP program in your command.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 1500.59: Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, (Washington, DC: November 2010).
2. Ibid.
3. Naval Safety Center, “Marine Corps Injury Data 2015,” Web Enabled Safety System report compiled on 27 May 2016.
4. Ibid.
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 1500.54: Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, (Quantico, VA: 2001).
6. United States Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 219/11: Marine Corps Martial Arts Program Updates*, (Washington, DC: April 2011).
7. Martial Arts Center of Excellence, *Martial Arts Center of Excellence Newsletter*, (Quantico, VA: March 2016).
8. *MCO 1500.59: MCMAP*.
9. J.C. Coulson, J. McKenna, M. Field, “Exercising at Work and Self-reported Work Performance,” *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2015).
10. Elham Sadeghi, et al., “Comparison of Life Satisfaction, Job Innovation in Martial-Arts Athletes,” *European Journal of Experimental Biology*, (London, UK: Insight Medical Publishing, 2013).

