



The Warrior Ethos: The Power of Knowing One's Why

What drives Sailors to keep going when challenges mount?

What gives them the strength to press forward when the mission seems overwhelming?

For Sailors, the answer lies in knowing their Warrior Ethos, their personal **why**. This article introduces the concept of knowing their **why** as the foundation for Warrior Ethos, Warrior Mindset, and Warrior Toughness, and how their **why** empowers them to commit with character, conviction, and decisiveness.

What Is Warrior Ethos?

The definition of Warrior Ethos is, "A written statement of a Sailor's commitment and sense of purpose."

It is a letter from a Sailor to their future self, serving as a reminder of the fundamental beliefs and values they hold, as well as what they fight for on both a personal and organizational level.

A Warrior Ethos is critical to the Warrior Mindset. It is one of the most important weapons in a Sailor's arsenal to increase toughness and resilience, resulting in optimized performance. There will be times when Sailors have a setback or a challenge and need to rely on their Warrior Ethos to reinvigorate their motivation and tenacity.

Setbacks can come from many angles such as ending a relationship, failing to get a promotion, or not reaching a milestone. When these challenges arise, a Sailor's Warrior Ethos, a key component of their overall spiritual readiness, provides a crucial foundation. A strong sense of identity and character grounded in Warrior Ethos enables them to get back on track.



A Sailor looking at their reflection with ships at sea



I think of Warrior Ethos as guiding values that fuel the fighting spirit and serve as a compass to reach the desired destination.

– LT Milo Curtis

For What Are Sailors Willing to Fight?

LT Milo Curtis explains, "Think of the interior of your Spirit as a pantry. Inside are the key ingredients that shape your identity, your values, your name, your connections, and your goals. The name tapes on your uniform say, U.S. Navy and your last name, but what does that name mean? What principles guide your life? What relationships do you rely on? Where are you going in 5 or 10 years?"

All of these ingredients come together in a clear statement that says, 'This is what my life is about. This is what I'm aiming for.' From that, you identify what you are willing to fight for, what you refuse to compromise, and what you are willing to sacrifice.

Warrior Ethos is more than words on a page. It is the reflection of your life's direction, your values, and the standard you hold yourself to."

The Role of Spiritual Readiness

Developing strong character builds the mental toughness needed to face challenges in both work and life. A personal Warrior Ethos empowers resilience and unwavering determination, even when confronted with overwhelming obstacles.

For a Sailor, character is who they are and why they do what they do. Spirit in the

context of Warrior Ethos is neither religious nor anti-religious in nature but encompasses a broad range of sources for meaning and strength. Nevertheless, some Sailors can solidify their purpose and bolster their spiritual readiness by connecting to the divine, participating in a faith community, whereas others may find their purpose through reflection, sacrifice, learning, or family.

Through regular practice, Sailors can develop their Spirit by working toward the person they want to become. For example, they can review their daily actions and ask themselves, "Did I behave in a way that aligns with the character I am working toward?" and "Did my behavior reflect good leadership qualities?"

Spiritual development enhances the ability to perform with greater decisiveness and conviction.

Decisiveness is the ability to make decisions quickly and confidently. When Sailors have a firm grasp on their values and beliefs, circumstances do not dictate decision-making. Their values and beliefs guide them to take the lead and act decisively.

Conviction is believing in themselves, their values, and their decisions. When Sailors take the time to know themselves and what values and beliefs guide them, they can act thoughtfully and confidently.

For Sailors, it is only a matter of time before they find themselves in a situation that will expose their Spirit.

Accountability Through Ethos

LT Milo Curtis points out, "The work Sailors are called to do is both a privilege and a burden. If we are not careful, it can be corrosive to our spirits and to who we are. We have to have that internal framework and fortitude.



Identity, Relationships, Goals, and Values shaping Warrior Ethos

One way to think about it is having really good 3M protocol for the Spirit, and the ethos lays out what that is supposed to look like. I get to make those decisions. This is what my interior maintenance of the Spirit is going to look like.

Taking the time to sit down and write this out becomes very important. I can have these things rattling around in my head, but the minute I put them down on paper and see them in black and white, something begins to shift. It exposes what is real. It makes clear whether these are just nice, flowery words or whether they can sustain me through life's greatest trials.

When I write out my ethos, I make transparent my identity, my key relationships, my connections, and my goals. Are these just wishes, or are these real ambitions I am pursuing in my life? Putting it on paper helps me see it clearly. As I face decisions in life, it makes clear what I must say yes to and what I must say no to. The ethos helps create clarity.

Another advantage of writing it down is that I now have something I can share with a good friend and ask them to hold me accountable. I do not want this to be something that only makes me feel good in hard times, because

that will not sustain me over the long term. I want to actually be better, not just feel better. I want to live as the person I am supposed to be.

That is the value of taking the time to do this. Revisiting it during seasons of transition is critical. It becomes a living document that articulates the direction of my life. Writing it down makes things transparent so I know what my yeses and nos will be, and so I can be held accountable. That becomes truly essential."

Building the Foundation: Warrior Mindset

Warrior Toughness trains Sailors to approach training evolutions and challenges using the Warrior Mindset, which is defined as a continuous cycle of Commitment, Preparation, Execution, and Reflection.

The goal of Warrior Toughness is to enable the Warrior Mindset by helping Sailors know what they are committed to, prepare for the event or mission, execute at peak performance, and reflect on what went right while identifying areas of opportunity.

The Warrior Mindset can only be effective if each domain includes the



A Sailor weight training next to the Warrior Mindset model

building and maintenance of the Mind, Body, and Spirit.

Sailors sharpen the Mind by strengthening it through mindfulness exercises, and they sharpen the team by practicing peer-to-peer support.

They improve the Body by using the Navy Operational Fitness and Fueling System (NOFFS) to engage in physical fitness, proper nutrition, and sleep hygiene, and they improve the team by engaging in healthy behaviors and promoting intentional recovery.

In the same way, they develop the Spirit by knowing their **why** and by remaining aware of how personal values tie to organizational values. They develop the team by practicing life in accordance with

those values and modeling ethical behavior.

Just as athletes condition their minds, bodies, and spirits to achieve victory, Sailors train their own minds, bodies, and spirits to enhance toughness and resilience, leading to optimal performance.

Building the Foundation: Warrior Toughness

For Sailors, Warrior Toughness means being able to take a hit and keep fighting, to perform under pressure, and to excel in the day-to-day grind. It is the Navy's holistic program, built from years of research that develops toughness and resilience while optimizing performance and mitigating stress.

Warrior Toughness is defined as the ability to keep going by tapping all sources of



Sailors practicing Warrior Ethos through service, family, teamwork, and dedication

strength and resilience. Through rigorous training, the fighting Spirit of Sailors, and the steadfast support of families, the Navy sustains a culture of warfighting excellence and hones its ethos: Sailors do not give up the ship, they never give up on their shipmates, and they never give up on themselves. They are never out of the fight.

In the era of Great Power Competition, Sailors must be prepared for combat engagements unlike any since World War II. Now more than ever, the Navy requires Sailors to be mentally, physically, and spiritually tough.

When Warrior Ethos Matters Most

The Warrior Ethos guides Sailors in every season of life. It provides direction and resilience, not just during high-pressure situations, but also in moments of abundance and change.

LT Milo Curtis explains, "It comes into play during challenges, when there is disappointment, loss, or the grind of life that makes every day feel the same. Warrior Ethos keeps the mind fixed on something beyond the moment, reminding us that every challenge has an end. It helps us stay true to our values

and relationships, and it supports us in maintaining our course through the storms of life.

The Warrior Ethos is also valuable during times of celebration. After deployment, Sailors often take leave with big plans to rest or reconnect with loved ones. Rest has its place, but seasons of abundance can also distract us from what matters most. The Warrior Ethos reminds us to prioritize family, live our values, and embrace opportunities for growth, even in good times.

Finally, military life is transient. We move often, change commands, and enter new seasons of life such as marriage, children,



When change happens, falling back on your ethos helps control emotions and prepares you for what's next. It builds the mental strength to perform under pressure.

CMDM Toby Ruiz



Sailors mooring on the USS HIGGINS

carried us through on USS HIGGINS during the start of Iraqi Freedom.” – CMDCM Toby Ruiz

How Do Sailors Prepare for Challenges Ahead?

LT Milo Curtis says, “You need to look ahead to the demands that will be required of you based on your rate or the responsibilities you carry as an officer. Learn from sea stories and the experiences of those who have served in your rate or in similar leadership roles. Consider the worst possible scenarios you might face and ask yourself, ‘Is your ethos preparing you for those circumstances?’ If not, what must you do to reshape your ethos so you are ready when that moment comes?”

or caring for aging parents. Through all of this, Warrior Ethos remains steady because it goes with us. Even if I move where no one knows my name, I can live out of my ethos and face uncertainty with confidence, knowing what my life is supposed to be about.”

How a Sailor's Why Supports Mission Readiness

“I will never forget my time aboard USS HIGGINS as a first class petty officer. We were running the standard routines, moving through the basic cycles, and drilling over and over again. Repetitive scenarios; it got boring and dull. But I kept asking myself, ‘why are we here?’ I am a United States Sailor. That reminder, tied to the Sailors Creed and my

Warrior Ethos, became my anchor.

Sure enough, we got the call to take position on the northern side of the Arabian Gulf and stand by for launch. Suddenly there was a new energy across the ship; the nerves, the tension, the uncertainty. For me, it felt like this was exactly what we had been preparing for. When the call came, everyone was ready, everyone knew their role, and we executed exceptionally well.

Military life can feel like hurry up and wait, and that can wear down your mindset. But when you hold onto your **why**, when you stay grounded in your ethos and what you are contributing, you are able to rise to the occasion. That is what



Warrior ethos builds discipline and confidence in ourselves and our teams. It gives us purpose, and that purpose keeps us ready to deliver when the tough moments come.

CMDCM Toby Ruiz

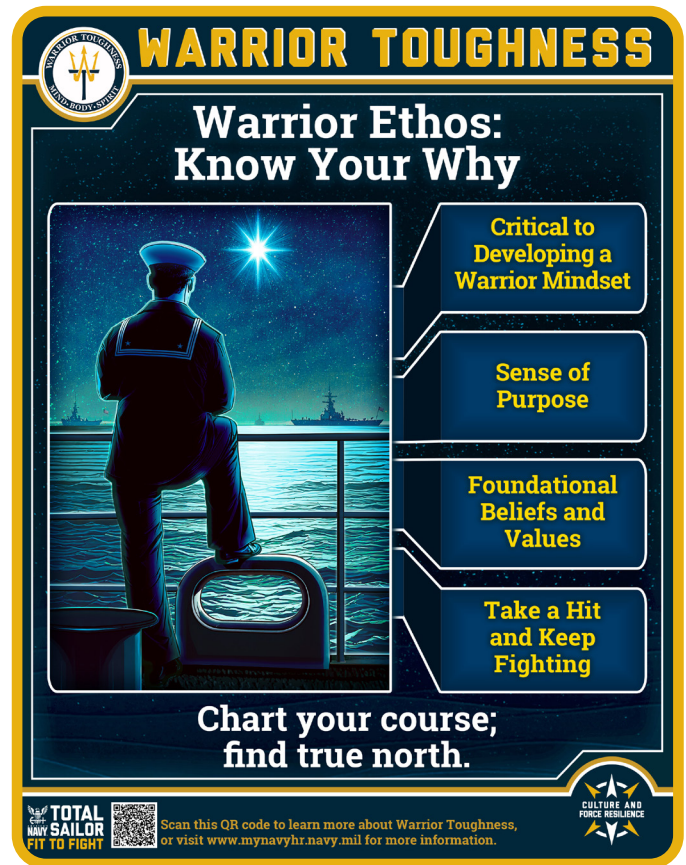
Wrap-Up

As Sailors move through the execution phase of the Warrior Mindset, their **why** should be continually sharpened, honed, and refined through experience and reflection.

Maintaining an updated record of this **why** allows it to guide decisions, actions, and responses in both routine and high-pressure situations.

Regularly reviewing and refining their **why** ensures that Sailors act with character, conviction, and decisiveness.

In this way, the Warrior Ethos remains a living framework that sustains resilience, reinforces purpose, and empowers Sailors to meet the demands of their service and their lives.



Warrior Toughness Warrior Ethos: Know Your Why infographic

For more information, check out the videos and podcast about Warrior Ethos: Know Your Why.



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