

BATTLE BUDDIES

Soldiering and fighting have a lot in common.

BY KELLY CRIGGER



Whether he was leading Marines or fighting in the WEC or UFC, Brian Stann had the same goal—defeat the enemy. The tactics and weapons of the Marine Corps were, of course, gallactically different than the tools of his new profession, but the end result remained the same: get close, overwhelm the adversary with superior firepower, and deliver the finishing blow. The parallel goals of MMA and the military make them fraternally compatible and are the reasons that Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines are the perfect demographic for the sport. Each profession instills a warrior spirit that is uncommon in the modern world, where comfort is expected. That may be why an increasingly talented crop of young fighters is coming out of the armed forces, but does that make them any different than the professional fighters who have dedicated their lives to the sport?

Physically, fighters with military backgrounds don't have an advantage over those who don't serve. The training is simply superior outside the military, and many servicemen have spent some of their prime years serving their country instead of training. That puts them behind the power curve, but there's something a tour of duty can provide that can't be taught in any gym. People with military experience, and especially ones with a combat tour, are more adept at handling the pressure of a professional fight because it simply doesn't match up to the things they've seen and done.

"A fighter who has done a tour of duty has put his life on the line before, and once you have done that, getting into the cage isn't that scary," says former Marine sniper and current XFC lightweight Bruce Connors. "While MMA can give a soldier the mental and physical tools to use in a military experience, everyone knows a fight in the cage, even if it is NHB, is different than fighting for your buddies' lives or even your own."

Army Staff Sergeant and Strikeforce middleweight Tim Kennedy agrees. "The way that we deal with stress I think is the biggest difference," he says. "We have been shot at, we have been blown up, we have gone on for weeks without showers or real food, days without sleep. Stepping into the cage is just another day, except we won't die from this day's work."

For most young men and women who join the armed forces, there's a maturing process that happens quickly when they're thrown into an adverse situation with a bunch of people they only recently met. This can translate to the cage. UFC middleweight Jorge Rivera grew up fighting in the suburbs of Boston and joined the Army at 17 years old, where his time as an Armored Cavalry Scout taught him valuable lessons that he applied to the Octagon. "I think that by attempting to conquer your fears and stepping out at such an early age in life and taking on a job where your life is literally on the line, it prepares you mentally for just about anything," says Rivera.

"While in the military, I was immersed into situations where I didn't know what was going to happen and my adrenaline stayed elevated," says former Army Sergeant and current Ring of Fire lightweight Sam Rauch. "I have seen both fighters and soldiers lose control over their emotions in a high-stress situation. It really is about what you do with your adrenaline that counts."

The ability to cope with a stressful situation and manage emotions is where military experience pays off for fighters today, but there's also the tactical benefit that comes with planning and ex-

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ecuting operations that can provide an advantage. Former Marine Lieutenant and U.S. Naval Academy graduate Brian Stann uses his military experience to develop a strategy and plan for a fight on a level most men don't.

"Most guys are prepared physically for a fight," Stann says. "It's the mental aspect that separates everyone. The most important thing the Marines taught me is to seize the initiative and retain it. That means I need to dictate the pace and make my opponent fight on my terms. In my last fight, which I lost, as soon as I let my opponent take the initiative, I lost."

THE OCTAGON PREREQUISITE

The relationship between MMA and the military doesn't just flow one way. It's not all about using military skills to transition to the sport. In fact, the military uses MMA as a proving ground to build confidence, especially in the Army. Fort Benning, Georgia, is the home of The Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) where soldiers learn hand-to-hand combat skills that they take back to their units. The MACP is not only an institution of higher learning for all things combative, but goes to great lengths to strip soldiers of the one thing that has a great chance of getting them killed in combat—fear. The philosophy is simple: if you can conquer your fear and fight another man toe-to-toe, then your chances of being successful in a real combat situation when bullets are flying is greatly increased.

"The defining characteristic of a warrior is the willingness to close with the enemy," says MACP founder and president, Matt Larsen. "Confidence comes from competence. It is not enough to simply tell soldiers to be aggressive. They must have a faith in their abilities that is built through hard and arduous training and know that they are going to win. So, when that weapon does malfunction three feet from the bad guy, they will instinctively attack."

"I believe there is no more realistic simulator for combat than an MMA fight," says former Navy Sailor and UFC lightweight Dale Hartt. It's a sentiment echoed by the Army's most recognized fighter and Green Beret, Tim Kennedy. "I believe that training combatives better prepares soldiers for handling certain situations in combat," he says. It can help them defuse a potentially explosive situation by having the training to only use the required amount of force necessary."

MMA is also therapeutic for our wounded vets. Marines at Camp



Soldiers from Alpha Company work on their grappling skills.

Lejuene have been using MMA training to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder and regulate their sleep patterns. At the heart of the matter is the reason young men and women join the Marine Corps—to be warriors. When there's no one left to lob grenades at them, they have difficulty adjusting to a slower paced lifestyle, especially when they're physically or mentally wounded. MMA training provides the satisfaction and solace that they can't get in a roundtable discussion about how they feel. It's a small way for MMA to give back to the profession of arms.

EVERY FIGHTER IS AN ISLAND

As close as the two professions are, there's actually a chasm that separates MMA and the military in the form of their support functions. The military is a collective body where one soldier's actions affect his battle buddies to his left and right and vice versa. A soldier is grounded in the knowledge that what he does is for the greater good, both for his unit and his country. From their first day in uniform, soldiers are instilled with the knowledge that their mistake could cost someone his life, and the history of our armed forces is littered with the tales of men laying down their lives for their brothers in arms. It's a selfless life that espouses camaraderie, teamwork, and sacrifice.

A mixed martial arts fighter, no matter how devoted his team is to him, is ultimately an individual, fighting for his own glory and monetary gain. He hasn't been conscripted into a service and doesn't fight to defend any political ideology. A fighter's life revolves around his own training, his sleep, his diet, and his publicity requirements, such as interviews and photo shoots for his sponsors. It's a selfish existence and is the polar opposite of what a soldier signs up for—a cause greater than himself.

"The mindset between a military gym and a professional one is vastly different," says Stann. "When I won a fight in the WEC, I

felt like I was winning for the gym and the whole Corps, but now that I'm no longer a Marine, it feels more like an individual win. I have a great team that supports me, but it's not the same."

WATCHING EACH OTHER'S BACKS

From the first day of basic training, Army soldiers are assigned a battle buddy that they look out for no matter what. It breeds an air of camaraderie and the knowledge that whatever the task, you're battle buddy has your back. The symbiotic relationship between the military and MMA is a similar bond that's bolstered by a mutual appreciation for one another's goals and objectives. On one side of the cage, there are the troops who appreciate the moxie it takes to climb into a ring. On the other side are the pugilists who harbor the same admiration toward the armed forces.

"There's nothing more manly than being a soldier," UFC president Dana White says. "I've known some tough men, but let me tell you, there's nothing tougher than being a soldier." White's words are not just hot air. He's backed them up by filling numerous

overseas USO tours with his marquee fighters, despite the risk they pose to his greatest assets.

Apart from the men already quoted here, there is a herd of fighters currently in MMA with military backgrounds. Andrew Chapelle, Matt Dunlap, Jeremiah Riggs, Muzimal Khan, Tommy Truex, Adam Castaneda, Kris McCray, Jarrod Card, Tim Crier, and the legendary Randy Couture, who was an Army Sergeant, are just a few of the ever expanding demographic of former Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines who have answered the call to duty, but now have a different battle buddy. 🇺🇸

