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HONOR and the AMERICAN WARRIOR

The concept of honor is elusive and fragile, residing in the mind, heart and soul of the individual. By Joseph F. Callo
In a speech to the Continental Army, General George Washington—depicted here saluting his troops at Trenton—defined honor as a matter of character and principle.
The American military lexicon is replete with the concept of honor. John Paul Jones, portrayed in a 1780s bust, equated honor with patriotism.
Honour pricks me on.
Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then?
Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No.
Or take away the grief of a wound? No.
Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? No.
What is honor? A word.
What is in that word “honor”? Air. A trim reckoning.
Who hath it? He that died o’ Wednesday.
Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No.
’Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead.
But will it not live with the living? No.
Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore, I’ll none of it.
Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.

The above verses, spoken by the jaded and cynical Sir John Falstaff in William Shakespeare’s 16th century play Henry IV, Part I, may be the best-known rumination on military honor, though it is certainly not the first. In his 5th century BC History of the Peloponnesian War historian and Athenian general Thucydides wrote, “The greatest dangers are ever the source of the greatest honors.” Other early references on the subject include the epic poem Beowulf, written about the year 1000, which included these verses: “Let him who may gain honor ere death. That is for a warrior, when he is dead, afterward best.” Other military notables, including Napoléon Bonaparte and theorist Carl von Clausewitz, sounded off on the subject, each with differing though generally encouraging perspectives.

The subject of honor also appears early in U.S. military history, in the text of what was tantamount to the nation’s first declaration of war, otherwise known as the Declaration of Independence:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Warrior turned statesman George Washington embraced the concept, and various sources cite anecdotally how he attached the idea to character: “[In war] you must have men of character activated by principles of honor.” In 1777 Continental Navy hero John Paul Jones was more personal though no more specific when he wrote to a friend, “I would lay down my life for America but can never trifle with my delicate notions of honor.” Two centuries later General George S. Patton Jr. shared a similarly broad sentiment in a speech to the troops of the U.S. Third Army hours before D-Day: “A real man will never let his fear of death overpower his honor.”

One of the best known American references to military honor came in a farewell address General Douglas MacArthur delivered to the U.S. Military Academy’s Corps of Cadets on May 12, 1962. In that speech he at least gave some dimension to the idea of military honor by positioning it alongside the other ideals expressed in West Point’s motto: “Duty, Honor. Country: Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be.”

The word “honor” is ubiquitous in the modern American military lexicon. The nation’s highest military award for valor is the Medal of Honor, and categories of discharge from the services include both honorable and dishonorable classifications. All three military academies have honor codes, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has a 24-hour honor guard, and on repatriation to the United States an honor guard meets the remains of those killed in action overseas.

Honor is clearly an important ethos in this country’s military culture. However, it remains a surprisingly difficult concept to pin down, and when one asks the simple question, What is military honor? brows furrow, and even
linguistic specialists fail us. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, for example, defines it—among other super-ficialities—as a “good name.” The American Heritage College Dictionary goes somewhat further, defining it as “a code of integrity, dignity and pride…maintained in some societies by force of arms.”

Given the lack of a clear and universal definition of honor, the narratives of such American heroes as Nathan Hale are instructive toward gleaning the essence of it. In 1775 Hale, a Yale graduate and young schoolteacher, took up arms as a Connecticut militiaman in the American Revolution. A year later during the Battle of Long Island he accepted the dangerous assignment to don a disguise and slip behind enemy lines to report on British troop movements. At the time espionage was considered a somewhat unseemly aspect of warfighting, thus when captured, Hale was summarily hanged. By his execution the British hoped to undercut the fledgling Continental Army’s morale. But Hale, who admittedly failed at a tactical level, ultimately handed his enemy a strategic defeat through his sense of honor, reflected dramatically in the last words attributed to him: “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

Those words, inscribed for posterity at the base of an iconic Bela Lyon Pratt statue of Hale in the oldest section of the Yale campus, in New Haven, Conn., are a reminder that powerfully informs our idea of military honor. Hale’s words delineated both physical courage and a commitment to the cause of liberty as core elements of U.S. military honor during a critical juncture in American history. Transcending death itself, they became part of the U.S. military ethos.

In a 1776 letter to Continental Congress delegate Robert Morris, Hale’s compatriot John Paul Jones further clarified how those risking their lives in the struggle for freedom perceived their cause: “The situation of America is new in the annals of mankind; her affairs cry haste, and speed must answer them.”

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Horatio Nelson, a contemporary of Jones and Hale and subsequent British hero of Trafalgar, articulated a narrower aspect of military honor in a 1783 letter to a friend: “True honour, I hope, predominates in my mind far above riches.” His comment came in an era of naval warfare steeped in the practice of issuing prize money to victorious crews, and it made the blunt point that military honor comes above self-interest, particularly financial self-interest.

British author Adam Nicolson, who wrote about Nelson’s era in his 2005 book Men of Honour, takes the concept of military honor in a different direction: “The naval officer is a gentleman and acts with honour because he does his duty in bringing about the annihilation of the enemy….Battle was the place where honour was validated.”
Both men add to the short list of universal qualities embraced by the idea of military honor.

**In recent times** some have questioned the entire concept of honor with regard to armed forces. During the Vietnam War, for example, journalists, politicians, teachers and even members of the clergy openly challenged the notion that honor existed in any of America’s military services. Some of the more vehement antiwar activist groups and individuals transformed their passionate opposition into overt denigration of members of the fighting forces—men and women, conscripts and volunteers alike. Back on the home front those in military uniform faced verbal abuse and sometimes even physical assault. Some protesters even besmirched the honor of U.S. prisoners of war and their families, summarizing their rationale in the dismissive phrase, “They are getting what they deserve.”

As Nathan Hale answered those who sought to strip away his honor, so, too, the vast majority of American military personnel in the Vietnam War silenced their critics with honorable behavior under some of the most trying physical and psychological conditions. The bond they developed with fellow warriors and their sustained focus on the mission illuminate two more basic elements of military honor. Such attributes allowed those who survived that war to do so with honor. In his memoir *When Hell Was in Session* repatriated Vietnam War POW Rear Adm. Jeremiah Denton addressed those qualities:

> The vast majority of American prisoners in North Vietnam upheld their country’s honor, with enormous consequences for their nation’s pride and prestige. If we had come out of there defeated and bowed, our country would have too.

In his thoughtful reflection Denton emphasized the importance of military honor not only to those in uniform but also to their civilian countrymen. His words are also a poignant reminder that American military personnel often face far more stringent moral standards than the general citizenry.

An additional point raised by the Vietnam War, one also inherent in Hale’s story, is that military honor is not inexorably linked to victory. To seek victory may be part of a warrior’s honor code, but when victory proves elusive, honor is not automatically compromised. In fact, courage under the stressful circumstances of captivity—especially in the hands of a ruthless enemy—is at least on a par with courage in combat.

**The 1990–91 Gulf War** and more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were marked by unfamiliar adversaries, evolving tactics and game-changing new weapons—notably drones—all of which raised a host of ethical questions related to combat. There has been, however, no apparent diminution of the importance of honor in the American armed forces. For example, the U.S. Navy SEALs—whose origins stretch back to the World War II-era Amphibious Scouts and Raiders—recently adopted a warrior creed that includes a clear statement on the subject: “Serve with honor and integrity on and off the battlefield.” Other statements in the SEAL code also speak directly to the concept of military honor, such as, “Ready to lead, ready to follow,” “Take responsibility for your actions,” “Excel as warriors through discipline and innovation,” and “Train for war, fight to win, defeat our nation’s enemies.”

Given the ongoing U.S. military stand-down in the Middle East, the question arises, *What about the future?* There are worrisome signs. Among the most immediate is a general trend away from traditional values in America. As military institutions evolve, will that erosion of values threaten the traditional concepts of military honor? Time will tell.

The quality of civilian leadership of the U.S. military will also influence traditional concepts of military honor. If, for example, civilian leaders are overly political in their decisions, or if they use the military as an incubator for social experimentation, they risk sacrificing honor to inevitable cynicism.

Perhaps the most serious threat to the preservation of honor in our armed forces is a potential nationwide loss of a commitment to political liberty. Such resignation would shake the foundation of the U.S. military’s honor code.

There is, however, an important wild card in play, a factor that may ensure such concepts survive as part of the greater American culture—namely the time-honored process of internalizing honor. Despite the numerous external factors that accompany a military career, it is ultimately the individual warrior who must cultivate a sense of honor, a process nurtured by one’s commitment to unit cohesion and the well-being of one’s fellow warriors.

**Perhaps the only conclusions** one could draw about American military honor is that it is a dominant but inexact—and possibly impermanent—concept, one that can never be committed fully to paper by scholars or pundits. It is written and rewritten daily by the warriors who stand for the United States, day and night, in dangerous places throughout the world. And it is often written in blood. **MH**

Joseph Callo is a retired U.S. Navy rear admiral and the author of John Paul Jones: America’s First Sea Warrior. For further reading he recommends Nathan Hale: The Life and Death of America’s First Spy, by M. William Phelps; Men of Honour: Trafalgar and the Making of the English Hero, by Adam Nicolson; and Nelson: The Admiral, by Colin White.