What It Means to Be a Man
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As discussed earlier, we are all human. Being human, we are all prone to make mistakes, to trip over life’s obstacles. When we do, we need to get back up. No one is perfect and we will all stumble and fall at some point in our lives. What is important is how we handle it. Getting back up, brushing ourselves off, learning from the experience, and continuing to march are the important things. Though Winston Churchill has historically been misquoted as saying, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts,” the sentiment rings true.\(^1\) Instead of following this advice, unfortunately, too many young people in the Marine Corps and in the country as a whole, prefer the “easy button” option of quitting. This manifests in

\(^1\) There is no documentation supporting claims that this quote came from Churchill. The earliest known source was from a 1906 volume of literary criticism, and it included a precursor of the saying: “Comedy amuses, corrects, and heartens. It shows that the vanities of life are not final, and the failures not always fatal.” Charles Mills Gayley and Clement C. Young, *English Poetry: Its Principles and Progress* (London: Macmillan, 1906), c.
many ways, but the most destructive way is through suicide. This ultimately selfish and completely irrevocable act leaves behind a trail of wreckage that, in some cases, cannot be overcome. For some, the immense pain of living with their burdens can outweigh any other considerations, but I cannot help thinking that if they consider all the people they will impact because of the action they are contemplating, it may save their life.

One of the many duties I had during the course of my career was that of casualty notification officer. When a Marine gets seriously injured or dies, the Corps notifies the Marine unit nearest to the servicemember’s next of kin and orders them to notify them in person as to what happened to their loved one and then to assist them in every way possible after that. I have performed this duty seven times, and two of those instances were for a Marine who committed suicide. At times, I wish I could have recorded those family notifications so I could replay it for any person considering suicide as a viable option to handling life’s challenges. There is no greater stress or sorrow to see how spouses, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers react to the horrendous news, and it was tremendously impactful. Listening to family members try to make sense out of a senseless act and wonder if it was somehow their fault is truly heartrending. If those considering suicide could see the turmoil they expose their own families to with the act, I think many would take a different path. Every time I hear about someone who has committed suicide, I flash back to one of those casualty notifications and remember the person’s family.

Life is a fight from start to finish, and those who make something of themselves realize this quickly and always keep fighting. Those who

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2 This activity is supported by the Department of Defense’s Casualty Assistance Program through each Service branch. The assistance to primary and secondary family members comes in the form of travel and transportation expenses, funeral honors and burial expenses, applying for benefits, personal effects and reports, legal matters, taxes, and counseling.
do not fade quickly or quit entirely. George H. Allen, former National Football League head coach of the then Los Angeles Rams and what is now the Washington Commanders, knew something about perseverance. Every season that he was a head coach, he led the teams to winning seasons and even brought Washington to the Super Bowl in the 1972 season, though they lost to the undefeated Miami Dolphins. A quote has been attributed to him that would be good to keep in mind:

One of the most difficult things everyone has to learn is that for your entire life you must keep fighting and adjusting if you hope to survive. No matter who you are or what your position, you must keep fighting for whatever it is you desire to achieve. If someone is not aware of this contest and expects otherwise, then constant disappointment occurs. People who fail sometimes do not realize that the simple answer to every day achievement is to keep fighting. Health, happiness and success depend upon the fighting spirit of each person. The big thing is not what happens to us in life, but what we DO about what happens to us.3

Those considering quitting or committing suicide would make a different decision if they were grittier in their approach toward life. Gritty people understand that life is full of challenges and that the only way to get through it is to drive on, to learn from their mistakes, and to keep trying. Gritty people succeed because they never give up. Angela Duckworth speaks to the concept extensively: “To be gritty is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. To be gritty is to hold fast to an interesting and purposeful goal. To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall down sev-

Figure 14. Coach George H. Allen, ca. 1981–87
Source: official U.S. Department of Health and Human Services photo.
en times and rise eight.” This is the attitude that gets you through anything life throws at you and, if one of those things knocks you down, it enables you to get back up and keep moving forward.

In my humble opinion, one of the grittiest people in the history of our country was Abraham Lincoln. He had a dirt-poor childhood with only one or two years, at best, of formal schooling. As he was growing up, he educated himself through extensive reading, despite taunts from his father that he spent too much time reading and not enough time working on the chores around their farm. He failed at the first couple of businesses he tried, then he became a lawyer by apprenticing with a practicing attorney and succeeded quite well in that profession. He also suffered a personal setback during this period when the woman he loved died at a young age. He subsequently married Mary Todd, but the marriage was not a happy one and one of their sons died as a young child. Lincoln ran for political office several times and lost most of those races but won the one that counted most—president of the United States.5

After his election, most of the Southern states voted to leave the Union and, between his election in November 1860 and his inauguration in March 1861, his predecessor, President James Buchanan, let them go through his own inaction. Many consider Buchanan to have been sympathetic to the Southern cause as evidenced by several members of his administration becoming leaders of the Confederacy. As a result, President Lincoln inherited one of the worst situations to confront a newly elected American president. He dodged reported assassination attempts as he traveled to Washington, DC, for his inauguration,

then sought to alleviate the concerns of those who objected to his presidency by reaching out to them directly in an effort to restore the Union peacefully. He was widely rebuked for his efforts and, when he attempted to have one of the forts still under the control of the federal government resupplied by unarmed ships, the people of Charleston, South Carolina, opened fire on the ships and then on the fort, ignit-
ing the Civil War.⁶ The next four years saw near constant personal attacks in the press, one incompetent general after another, battle loss after battle loss, massive casualties, violent and destructive draft riots in northern cities and a federal government teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, yet he persevered.⁷

To make matters worse, during this time, his wife was widely rumored to be having an affair and running up enormous and publicly embarrassing debts for her own wardrobe and to redecorate the Executive Mansion (it was not called the White House until President Theodore Roosevelt’s administration), all of which she lied about and desperately tried to hide. She was also intensely jealous and flew into a rage whenever women paid attention to him. These rages were focused on Lincoln and occurred no matter how public the forum. They were so bad that Lincoln’s two personal secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay, nicknamed her “the wildcat,” though they never used that nickname in Lincoln’s presence.⁸ Tragedy struck again in 1862 when another of his young sons, his favorite by some accounts, died from an unknown illness in the Executive Mansion and both he and his wife were nearly prostrate with grief.⁹

Lincoln suffered through each heartbreak, to include struggling personally with depression that he called “the Hypo,” but he never gave up.¹⁰ In my mind, this is about as gritty as you can get. His perseverance paid off when he was able to personally tour the captured city

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⁶ Freidel and Sidey, The Presidents of the United States of America; and Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln.
⁷ Freidel and Sidey, The Presidents of the United States of America; and Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln.
⁸ Kat Eschner, “People Have Spent Years Trying to Diagnose Mary Todd Lincoln from Beyond the Grave,” Smithsonian Magazine, 13 December 2016.
⁹ Freidel and Sidey, The Presidents of the United States of America; and Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln.
of Richmond, Virginia, on 4 April 1865, and then to receive the news of the surrender of the main Confederate Army under General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse on 9 April. Unfortunately, he did not have long to bask in the joy of this hard-won and long-awaited victory. Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth at Ford’s Theater in Washington, DC, less than a week later on the evening of 14 April and died early the next morning.11

Another tremendously gritty person was Winston Churchill. He led an amazing life of ups and downs, but he never quit, no matter what confronted him. As the first lord of the admiralty at the time World War I broke out, he was blamed for the military disaster of Gallipoli, though many have argued that he supported the effort as a way to avoid the slaughter on the war’s western front, which was deadlocked at the time. Originally proposed by Vice Admiral Sackville H. Carden, the operation involved a British Royal Navy attack on the Turkish Dardanelles, which was a sea passage up to Constantinople (renamed Istanbul after the conflict) from the Mediterranean Sea. Constantinople was the capital of Turkey, which was allied with the Germans against the French and British. When that plan failed, it was followed by an army attack on the Gallipoli peninsula, which made up the western side of the Dardanelles. If it had worked when attempted in the spring of 1915, it could have ended the conflict much sooner (the war eventually ended in November 1918).12 Then prime minister Herbert H. Asquith called it the one brilliant idea of the war.13

Unfortunately, neither attack worked, and many people lost their lives. Though Churchill simply backed the operation, this was over-

11 Freidel and Sidey, The Presidents of the United States of America.
looked when it came time to place blame within the media and by his political enemies. The plan was very poorly executed by the navy and army forces of Britain and its colonies as well as France, which led to its failure; but this was overlooked as well. While it is hardly fair to blame him for the poor execution, he was fired from his post just after the Royal Navy’s attack failed. One of the most popular newspapers of the day, The Morning Post, reported the following bit of propaganda in April 1915:

Who is responsible for this costly blunder—costly whether the present operation succeeds or fails? We assert that the First Lord of the Admiralty acted against the opinion of his experts (which he did not). We assert further that he led the Cabinet to believe he had behind him the opinion of Lord [John A.] Fisher (the most senior Navy Admiral), whereas Lord Fisher’s opinion was that the operation to have a chance of success must be conducted jointly by the army and the navy. The truth is that Winston Churchill is a danger to the country.14

In the early 1930s, Churchill warned everyone about the rise of a madman in Germany named Adolf Hitler. No one wanted to listen because they were so tired of conflict from the experience of World War I. Churchill was vilified and lost his seat in the British Parliament, then spent the next several years in what he called “the wilderness” because no one wanted him around. He wrote articles that continued to warn the country of the coming danger, but it either fell on deaf ears or many thought he was the lunatic, not Hitler. Regardless, his views were justified because, when the British found themselves in a war with a Germany led by that same Adolf Hitler in September 1939, the government called him back to service as the first lord of the admiral-

14 Freeman, “Unsinkable.”
ty. By May 1940, as France was knocked out of the war, they elected him prime minister.\footnote{Freeman, “Unsinkable.”}

Perhaps Churchill's finest hour, and maybe what he had been preparing for, came after the near total disaster at the French seaport of Dunkirk a month after he took office. British forces had to be evacuated from the port city on the coast of France after a severe defeat at the hands of German forces. The evacuation was a success in that hundreds of thousands of British and French soldiers were safely evacuated to England, but it was accomplished by evacuating them mostly without their weapons and equipment.\footnote{Maj L. F. Ellis, “Dunkirk, Bethune and Ypres,” in *History of the Second World War: The War in France and Flanders, 1939–1940* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953).} In the aftermath of this disaster, with most of the military unarmed and most of his senior ministers wanting to negotiate with Hitler to reach an armistice because they believed England had lost the war, Churchill would not hear of it. He was determined to fight on regardless of the cost or time needed to win. It was this determination to never quit and to persevere in the face of monumental challenges that enabled him to lead his country to victory through five difficult years. Some say he mobilized language to make that happen by motivating the English-speaking population to fight even though they were alone in the war against Germany from the time France surrendered in June 1940 until Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941. Here, I offer a reflection of Churchill's attitude about adversity:

> Through will, concentration, sacrifice and patience, adversity can be mastered. In fact, so many esteemed men and women have achieved their success by conquering obstacles that one wonders if real greatness is possible apart from stag-

\footnote{Freeman, “Unsinkable.”}

gering difficulties. The lesson of history seems clear: character formed through struggle is the price of true greatness.\(^{17}\)

What is most amazing about Churchill is what he accomplished while struggling with depression throughout his life (1874–1965). He called it “the black dog” and had many reasons for suffering from it.\(^{18}\) He was largely ignored by his socialite parents, who were more interested in going to parties and having affairs than their child (his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, died from syphilis). He was picked on unmercifully in the boarding schools he attended and lived an exceedingly public adult life that rendered him vulnerable to a great deal of intense public criticism. He tried many different things to avoid the effects of depression but was never quite successful. He repeated on a number of occasions that he did not like going near the edge of high places or the edge of a train platform with a train coming for fear of what he might do as a result of a split-second decision. Despite the setbacks, he led an immensely productive and successful life.\(^{19}\)

Another example comes in the form of the 2005 movie Cinderella Man, the true story of the Great Depression-era boxer James J. Braddock. He was doing very well before the depression hit, then a combination of lost bouts and extremely difficult economic times caused his family to hit rock bottom. They were barely able to keep the children fed and, at one point, they almost gave up their kids to relatives who could have taken better care of them. Through it all, Braddock never quit. He kept trying to find work to pay the rent, utility bills, and put food on the table. He was then given a lucky break by being picked


\(^{19}\) For more on Churchill’s life, see *Finest Hour, the Journal of Winston Churchill and His Times*, by the International Churchill Society.
for a fight when the promoter had no other alternative. Through his own desperation, as well as his personal drive to never quit, he won that fight and started the climb that enabled him to become a heavy weight champion against incredible odds. It is a truly amazing and heartwarming story.

Maybe it was the way I was raised, but quitting was never an option I could consider. At age 18, I went to the U.S. Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in June 1983. I wanted to take on the challenge that the school represented and earn my parachute wings. The school had a reputation for being tough, and the harassment began several days before the actual parachute training with constant yelling and endless numbers of push-ups as we prepared for the days to come. The Sunday afternoon before training started as we stood in formation in the blazing sun and heat of a Georgia summer, the instructors were yelling at everyone and generally making life unpleasant. At one point, they yelled, “Who wants to quit?” and about 30 of the aspiring paratroopers ran to the front of the formation and did just that—they quit. I remember being amazed by their actions since the hard part had not even begun yet. I shook my head and carried on.

When I went to Ranger School in 1989, something similar occurred in that many who volunteered to go to the school quit. The class started with more than 330 students and more than 100 recycled back into the class from the classes ahead of us during the eight-week course. Despite the lack of food, lack of sleep, and arduous training—I lost 30 pounds during the course—190 of us had enough grit to finish and graduate. I can only imagine the regrets the others had if they never went back, and the excuses they made to themselves and others since that time as to why they failed to graduate.

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Finally, let me clarify my attitude regarding quitting. There are times in life when we struggle to achieve a goal and conclude that it is not worth the effort required to achieve it. This realization after some soul searching is not necessarily a bad thing as long as it is made not because we have decided to take an easier route like quitting. It can save a lot of time, effort, and frustration if we have genuinely considered the situation fully and then come to such a conclusion. Many people ruin themselves pursuing something that costs them everything but, in reality, is not worth the effort. This is a judgment call that should be made after careful consideration and consulting with those around us who have our best interests in mind. It is also not a conclusion reached lightly. This last part is the distinction from the act of quitting.

In the end, everyone must realize that life moves pretty fast and will never be fair, so get over and on with it. As Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale said in his book *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, “Life is not fair. There is no moral economy or balance in the nature of things such that virtue is rewarded and vice punished. The good man hangs on and hangs in there. . . . Courage is endurance of the soul.”²¹ After spending seven and a half years as a prisoner of war (POW) in Vietnam after getting shot down, Stockdale could certainly speak to this concept. He survived and served as such an inspiring example for the other POWs that he was awarded the Medal of Honor after he returned home. He inspired his fellow inmates to persevere in the face of torture and years of solitary confinement. Stockdale’s example and writing seem to be exactly what we all need to see and read:

It sort of fell out of Epictetus’s proclamation that “difficulties are what show men’s character. Therefore, when a difficult crisis meets you, remember that you are the raw youth with whom God the trainer is wrestling.” But our bottom line was

this: The challenge of education is not to prepare people for success, but to prepare them for failure. I think that it’s in hardship and failure that the heroes and the bums really get sorted out.22

Just remember, quitting is a choice and, if allowed to become a habit, it can become a permanent condition. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb said in The Bed of Procrustes, “For the robust, an error is information; for the fragile, an error is an error.”23 Information implies that you can do something positive with it and make improvements to prevent further errors. Accepting an error as just an error for which nothing can be done is the path to oblivion.

I will conclude this chapter with a poem from my personal “Wisdom for the Ages” file by a man named Edgar A. Guest.24 It first appeared in a syndicated column in a number of different newspapers on 3 March 1921. Though time has passed since its original release, I still find it as inspiring now as it was more than 30 years ago.

**Keep Going**

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you are trudging seems all up hill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must—but don't you quit.

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22 Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, 220.
24 Edgar A. Guest was a British-born writer whose sentimental works were widely published in the United States. Often appearing in newspapers and on the radio, his optimistic rhymes typically focused on such subjects as home, mother, and the virtue of hard work.
Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When he might have won had he stuck it out;
Don't give up, though the pace seems slow—
You may succeed with another blow.
Often the goal is nearer than
It seems to a faint and faltering man,
Often the struggler has given up
When he might have captured the victor’s cup,
And he learned too late, when the night slipped down,
How close he was to the golden crown.
Success is failure turned inside out—
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems afar;
So stick to the fight when you are hardest hit—
It’s when things seem worst that you mustn’t quit.²⁵

Questions to Consider:
1. How much grit do you have?
2. How do you handle the inevitable stumbles in life? Are you able to get back up and carry on?
3. Can you use failures to learn from and get better?

Suggested Further Study

Probably Goodwin’s best book, but then again, I am an ardent admirer of Lincoln. The author displays Lincoln’s amazing wisdom and people skills in this book. It offers another great study in leadership.


An amazing story of grit and determination to keep struggling to survive and win. So many others gave up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but James Braddock never did.


An amazing book written by the former British prime minister, but still incredibly good. His story about how Churchill, almost singlehandedly, kept the British in the war against Hitler is truly inspiring.


This book can be a difficult read, but it is another one worth the effort because of the lessons it presents.