

Yoga 101

Why is everyone from Marines to military moms incorporating this form of exercise into their lives?

By Hope Katz Gibbs

Like many Marines, Major Ronald Woodaman is in top-notch shape. He runs, can do dozens of jumping jacks, and lifts more weight at the gym than many of his colleagues.

But when Woodaman pulled out his back last year, all those strenuous activities proved too painful. A friend suggested he try the yoga class that public health educator Christine Davidson was hosting at the Semper Fit Center, an exercise facility at Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Va. Woodaman figured he didn't have anything to lose, so he popped in for a one-hour session.

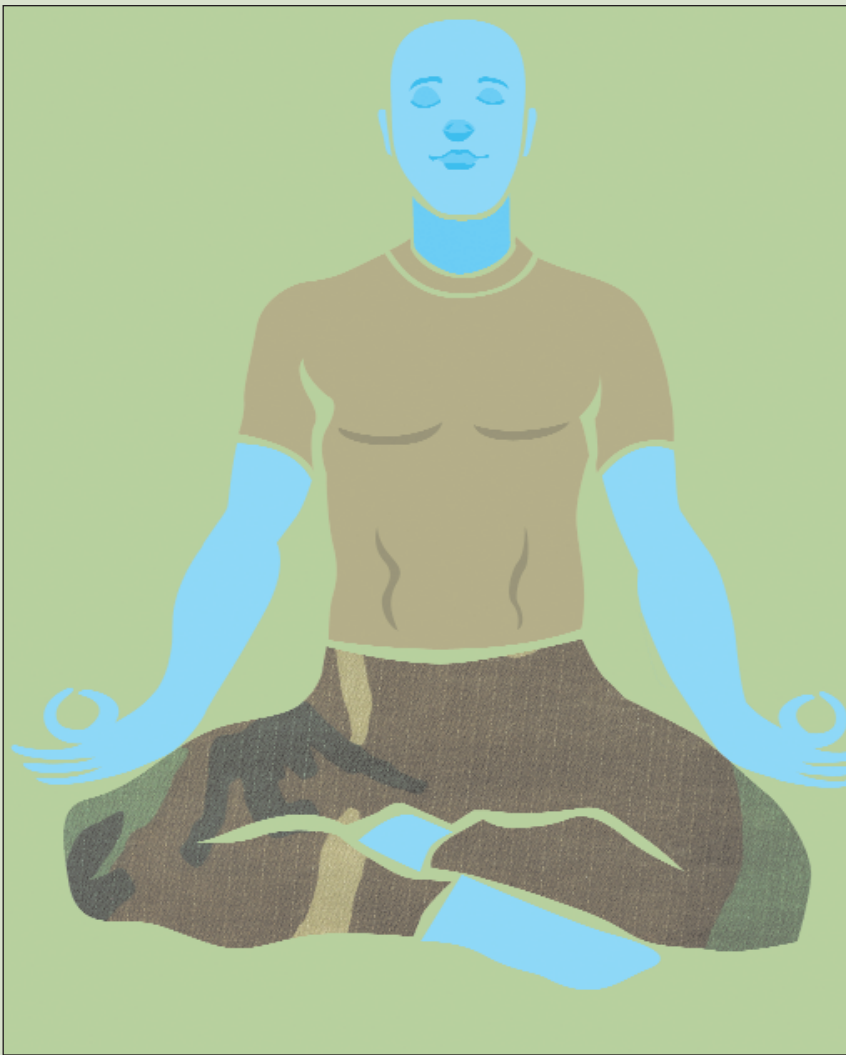
"I knew nothing about yoga, but that didn't matter to Christine," Woodaman shares. "She showed me how to do a few simple moves, and I left that first day thinking the class was really fun. Then I returned the following week, and the week after. After only a month, I was able to stretch more deeply and my back was feeling pretty good."

For anyone who might think yoga is for the faint of heart, Woodaman says they've never taken a class with Christine.

"Yoga is very different than jumping jacks and push-ups and other cardio exercises that get your heart beating fast and make you breathe hard. There is calmness to it, and a sense of well being from doing the stances that stretch you. Don't get me wrong, yoga can be very strenuous. But by doing the movements slowly, methodically and rhythmically, you don't just feel better – you feel cleansed."

In fact, Woodaman says many of the yoga poses stretched parts of his body that no other exercise would.

"You can play tennis or run, but those things can really beat up your knees and your back," he says. "Yoga doesn't beat up anything. It's hard work. But it's gentle and powerful, too."



“I knew it would help me to be more flexible, but I had no idea that you need to be really strong to hold some of those advanced yoga positions,” Brown explains. “The longer I do it, though, the better I get at it. I’m amazed at how bendable I am these days, and that was one of my goals because I don’t want to be an old woman who is stiff and can’t stand up straight.”

Brown was also pleased to realize that a yoga student doesn’t have to be able to wrap a leg around their head, or have the body of a ballerina.

“You just have to be willing to take the time to slow down, breathe deeply, and stretch your body,” she says.

Helping students become more flexible is the bottom line for yoga teacher Davidson, who has been teaching yoga for 13 years and practicing for 17.

“Most military people are strong, but not very flexible, and too often their hard-core training workouts can lead to

Perhaps that’s why yoga is so quickly growing in popularity. According to the *Yoga Journal*, in 2003 about 15 million people practiced the 5,000-year-old Indian discipline of stretching, breathing, and meditating. By 2004, that number jumped to 16.5 million—and nearly half of the people practicing (42 percent) were ages 35 to 54.

What’s the big attraction?

“Inner peace,” says military wife Becky Brown, 46, who began practicing yoga at Semper Fit in Quantico six years ago when her husband, George, was in the Marines. “For most of my adult life, I was a big fan of cardio training. I ran, did weight training, and was always on the go. Then I started doing yoga, and it was a real challenge to slow down for a whole hour.”

After only one session Brown discovered yoga wasn’t the simple form of exercise she thought it was.

injury,” she says. “That’s why I teach students Hatha yoga, which is exercise-based and has no meditation or religion connected to it. Mostly I want them to use this practice to relax and relieve their stress. Ultimately, it will lower their blood pressure and improve their overall health.”

Davidson’s philosophy is mimicked at many military bases around the globe. In fact, officials estimate that on 18 military bases worldwide, an average of 461 Marines and their families attend more than 43 yoga classes per week.

Although the connection between the military and yoga may raise a few eyebrows, the idea that yoga does a body good is becoming more commonplace in all the branches of the Armed Services.

Last year, Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., launched a pilot project examining the healing effect of

yoga on military personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

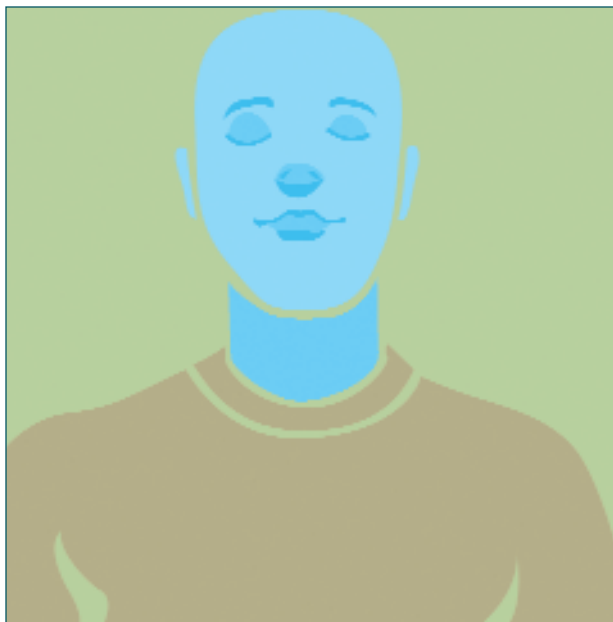
In Pensacola, Fla., several Navy SEALs are using yoga's breathing exercises to help with their diving. They are also finding that getting into unusual yoga poses is useful training for staying in confined spaces for long periods. Plus, military pilots are finding that yoga improves their posture, which helps them be more comfortable while flying in high-powered jets.

A case in point is 24-year-old Marine Lt. Alan Zarracina, who made the national news in July when Melissa Nelson, a reporter from the Associated Press (AP), interviewed him for an article she was writing on the connection between yoga and military. She found him successfully gliding into a split during a yoga class, and everyone from *The Washington Times* to Fox News and MSNBC picked up the AP story that explained how Zarracina had mastered difficult yoga poses such as back bends and shoulder stands.

Zarracina told the reporter about his experience studying yoga: "For the first two weeks, I didn't like yoga because it was painful. Yoga taps into core muscles that I don't regularly use. But it has helped improve my posture, and I feel more comfortable when I'm flying."

The connection between yoga and the military was also publicized in the June 2006 issue of the *Yoga Journal* when 26-year-old Marine Guy Duffner told reporter Andrea Kowalski how yoga changed his life. He discovered a form of yoga called Kundalini when he was deployed to Japan, and when he returned to the

States last year, he signed up for a yoga teacher-training program in Los Angeles. Today, Duffner can be found leading his unit through morning yoga and meditation.



"When I offered to teach [yoga], it was not well received at first," he told the *Yoga Journal* reporter. "I got groans and looks of dread from the men in my unit. But then it caught on, and now I have Marines from other units asking me if they can join in."

Renowned yogi Dr. Rishi Vivekananda Saraswati is not surprised, for he believes yoga helps military personnel become stronger on the deepest levels.

"Military units need everything yoga has to offer because yoga is designed to clear the blockages in our personalities," Saraswati wrote in a recent *Yoga Magazine* article. "Military personnel need to be strong-minded, confident and brave. A unit needs a facility for communication so people know what they are doing. Commanders need clarity of mind so they have the ability to see what is going on. All of these things come to life in the practice of yoga."

Yoga on the Web

Yoga Fit – Another good source for information is www.fityoga.com. It also offers lots of sound advice, and a spa and yoga studio finder.

The Yoga Journal – If you want to surf through mountains of well-organized, interesting information on yoga, check out articles on the *Yoga Journal* website: www.yogajournal.com.

Hope Katz Gibbs is a freelance writer in Clifton, Va., who has been happily practicing Downdog, Lotus, Warrior I and Baby Pose for the last 15 years.