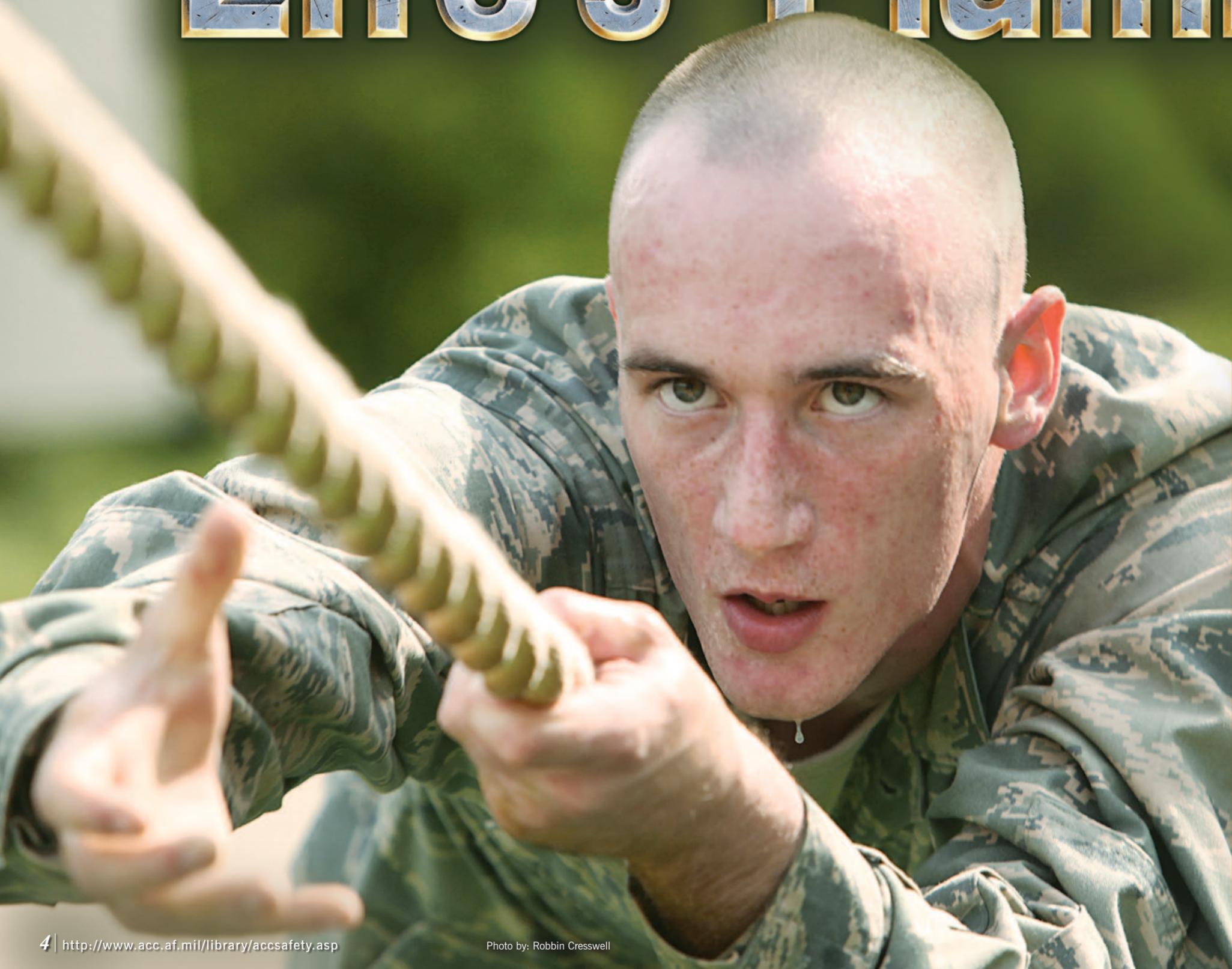


Life's Plumb-Line

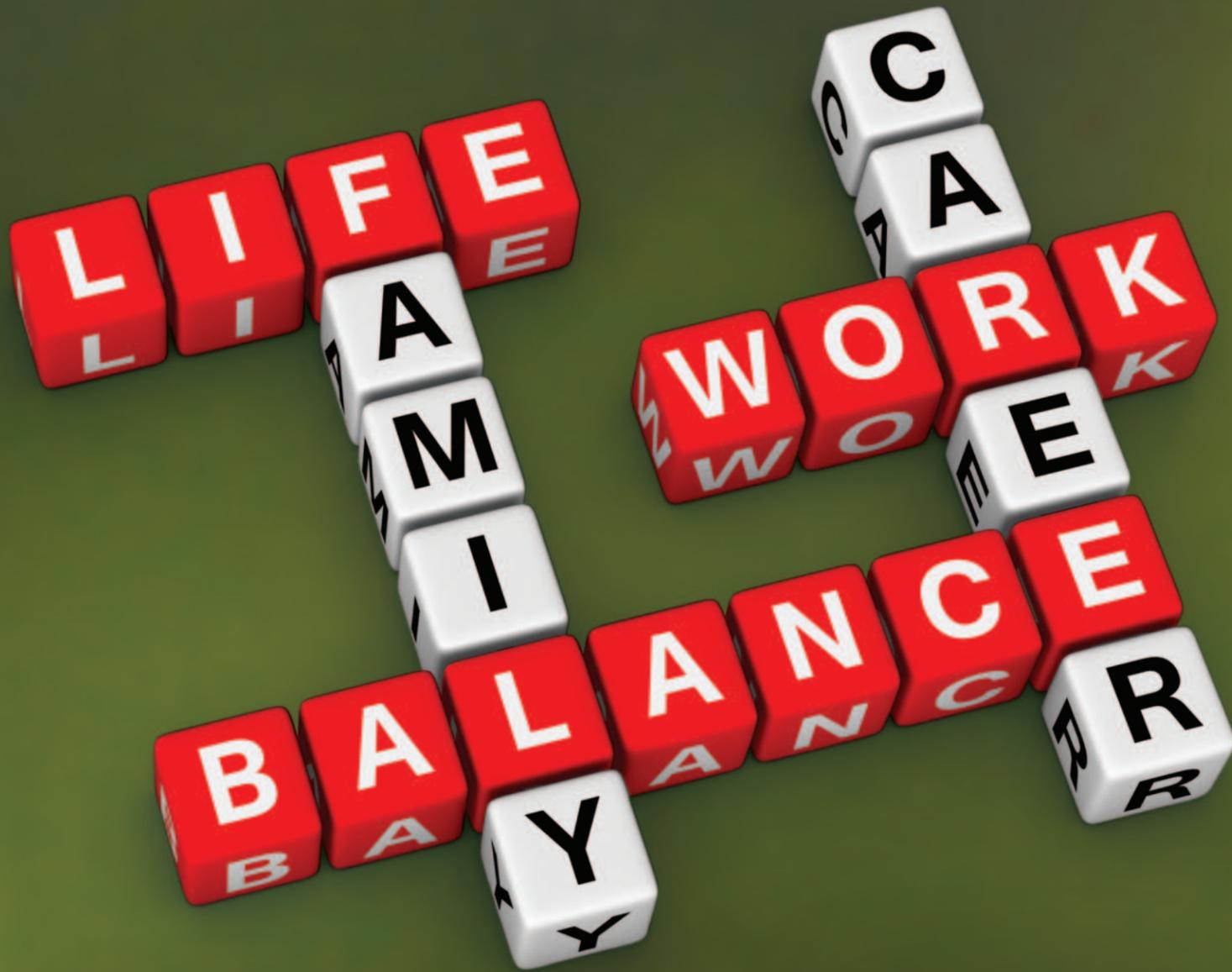


BY CHAPLAIN (COL.) JIMMY M. BROWNING

Ever since my grown kids exposed me to and convinced me of the ease of a smart-phone, I have been discovering and swapping apps. A recent discovery was an app that gives me several tools useful for my hobby of woodworking. One in particular is a "plumb bob." It is an electronic version of an ancient and very simple tool called a plumb line. A plumb line is nothing more than a piece of string with a pointed weight on the end. By holding up the string, the weighted pointer will hang straight down (being drawn vertical by the earth's gravity.) Therefore, it does not matter the angle of the handler, the plumb line will be vertical. By using a plumb line, a builder can check whether a post or wall is properly vertical. This electronic app, once calibrated, highlights a point on an X/Y axis indicating if an object is "plumb."

Like pilots who use instrument indicators like altimeter, attitude and air speed to keep situational awareness of their plane's position relative to the earth, we need some instrumentation for our lives. We can become overly fixated in one area of our lives and enter a danger zone in other areas without even realizing it. We need a plumb line to help us have situational awareness to determine if our lives are off-balanced or out of kilter. Sometimes we easily know when we are off-balanced. Other times, we are moving so gradually off-centered, we can reach a tipping point unexpectedly.

A few years back, I was listening to a senior enlisted leader's story as he was nearing retirement. While I listened to him for 45 minutes, he told me one thing I hope never to forget for my own life. Without knowing it, he was holding up to me a plumb line. After recounting so many of his military successes and achievements, he said with deep sadness, "I have done everything the Air Force has asked of me. I have exceeded their expectations and have done my job very well. I am proud of what I have accomplished as an Airman. However, it has cost me my family. I am retiring alone." Unfortunately, since then, I have heard that same story multiple times.



A quick Google search on “keeping balance in your life” revealed over 53 million results! Obviously, we do not need another article on “you need to keep balance in your life.” If the message is so prevalent, then why is it so hard to keep that balance?

Obviously, both external and internal factors can throw us out of balance. External factors are typically unexpected when they catch us ill prepared: unexpected baby, unexpected health issue, unexpected financial challenge, unexpected tragedy, unexpected

relationship loss, etc. Other less obvious factors are inward: a perfectionist personality, being overdriven for professional success to overcome personal insecurities, an unwillingness to let others share in the responsibilities and accolades, unnecessarily blaming yourself when you bear no fault, inability to forgive yourself and others, etc. Thus, we could protect our life balance by doing early preparation for unexpected possibilities. In addition, we should become more aware of our own

personality issues and needs in order to avoid driving others and ourselves crazy!

Yet, I sense this answer is insufficient for developing and maintaining balance. What if you could drop a plumb line that would highlight what is ultimately and substantially important in your life. What if it would clearly identify what is at the core of your being? In other words, what centers you? What is ultimately significant to you? What keeps all other relationships or things in proper perspective? What truly matters? What is your “one thing” using the classic line of Jack Palance, a tough taskmaster in the movie

“City Slickers”? This “one thing” is what your plumb line would indicate as your life’s pivotal point.

Take a moment and reflect on your own plumb line indications. Ask a significant other to reflect with you as you seek answers to the following questions: What is critically or substantively important to you? Around what do you orchestrate your life? Is it lasting? Has it changed? If so when and why? Will it withstand the struggles and trials of living and death? Will it center you when life unexpectedly or tragically happens? Are your life choices and actions consistent with your “one thing?” At the end of your life, will you still value your choice? How will it define your legacy?

These are tough questions. But, so is putting a plumb line against a wall. The plumb line will reveal an honest answer without bias.

Finally, after you define what is central in your life by which all other things encircle, you should stop from time to time to see if your plumb line is still pointing to that core importance. Or, have you let yourself become distracted again? If you center and balance your life, then your plumb line will consistently point to your life’s “one thing.” If not, then, your plumb line will indicate your ever-changing priority.

What a handy life app it would be to have a “life’s plumb line” to show easily and quickly what we have allowed either intentionally or randomly to become the center of our life. Then, if needed, we could adjust in order to maintain our life’s balance. ✨



Photo by: Carol Lawrence