This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book *All Quiet on the Western Front* with their own perspectives on warfighting, and come out of this session or sessions of small group PME with a better sense of history, identity, an purpose.

**Prep Work:** Be prepared to discuss the following selected reading from the book [The pagination for the following comments are based upon the First Ballentine Books Edition (paperback) August 1982]:

- Epigraph (first text in the book)
- Chapter One, pps. 11,12.
- Chapter Two, pps. 26-27.
- Chapter Three; pps. 45-50.
- Chapter Five, p. 86.
- Chapter Six, pps. 113,116,124, 132.
- Chapter Seven; pps. 157,167,183.
- Chapter Eight; pps. 193.
- Chapter Nine, pps. 193,203,216-226.
- Chapter Eleven; p. 280.
- Chapter Twelve; pps. 294.

**Discussion Questions:** All answers/ responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion. To the guide leader: There is no single right answer.

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation.

1. Epigraph: What is Remarque trying to say? “...death is not an adventure for those who have to stand face to face with it.”

   **Key Take-Away:** No matter what technology exists, war remains a human endeavor.

2. From Kantorek the teacher.

   Quote p 11; “…because even one’s parents were ready with the word “coward”; no one had the vaguest idea what we were in for.”
Quote p. 86, talking about taking a test and moving along in life; “how can a man take all that stuff seriously when he’s once been out here?”

Quote p. 167; “He dismisses the idea loftily and informs me I know nothing about it.”

Key Take-Away: The teacher (Kantorek) who shamed all of the students to go to war had no experience in war and had no idea what was in store for them. The third quote was when Paul is on leave and a man who had never been out to the front argues that Paul is wrong and knows “nothing about it [war]”. It is only wonderful if you have not been a part of it; though we must know how to wage war, we should only do so as a last resort.

3. “But by far the most important result was that it awakened in us a strong, practical sense of esprit de corps, which in the field developed into the finest thing that arose out of the war-comradeship.”

Key Take-Away: Why do we become a band of brothers? Is it necessary to survive? In Remarque’s eyes, the only good thing was comradeship—not winning, not losing, but Paul existing for his school buddies; to take care of one another and to survive with one another.

4. The story of Corporal Himmelstoss (pps. 45-50). Cpl Himmelstoss was a former postal worker. He had never been to war, but he was the Instructor for Paul and his schoolmates. His technique was brutal. He was the true “toxic leader”. They get to Himmelstoss and brutally beat him. Is this the right answer?

Key Take-Away: P. 49: “Himmelstoss ought to have been pleased; his saying that we should each educate one another had borne fruit for himself. We had become successful students of his method.” Himmelstoss had taught them brutally and he reaped the fruits of his brutality; they became just like him for a moment. Himmelstoss appears later in the book; how does he react to seeing his former students at first? What happens after he realizes they can keep him alive?

5. pps 11, 86 “Won’t you join up comrades?”. “How can a man take all that seriously (school tests) when he’s been out here?”. What good has their schooling done them?

Key Take-Away: It is not that the schooling was bad; it was that it was wasted. Up to the point they went to the front, their lives were meaningless. Finding their way back to the reality they knew before would also be a daunting if not impossible task.

6. Chapter Seven is mostly about his leave period and his interaction with his Mother. He was not the same little boy when he left: that boy was still in the closet in the form of the “too short trousers still hanging there.” That boy wanted to, but could never return. When he first got home as he went to see his Mother, he states: “I can go no further - mother, mother, Paul is here. I lean against the wall and grip my helmet and rifle. I hold them as tight as I can, but I cannot take another step…” Paul cannot face his old reality so he holds tightly to his new reality; his helmet and his rifle.

Key Take-Away: You will be changed forever by the face of war. It grips your heart and your mind and will not let go.
7. In Chapter Nine, Paul kills Gerard Duval. Up to now, war has been faceless except for the death of horses and men they can hear dying on the battlefield. Now Paul comes face to face with it as he stabs a French soldier who dives into his fighting hole. He instinctively stabs him and then must watch him die. He then has an overwhelming desire to know who he was, to understand his life. To understand how he lived. P. 193 has the quote: “A word of command has made these silent figures our enemies; a word of command could have might transform them into our friends.” Why were they fighting? Who was in the right? Each saw themselves as being in the right.

Key Take-Away: Killing is not an easy thing to do. From the movie Unforgiven, Clint Eastwood’s character says: “It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have. ... killin' a man.” In this book, Paul does not dehumanize his enemy. Sometimes it is easier to do that, then we do not have to think too much.

8. p 280: “The factory owners in Germany have grown wealthy.”

Key Take-Away: Is the military-industrial complex a winner in war? Should that concern us?

9. p 294: “And men will not understand us - for the generation that grew up before us, though it has passed these years with us already had a home and a calling; now it will return to its old occupations, and the war will be forgotten - and the generation that has grown up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some will merely submit, and most will be bewildered; the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin.”

Key Take-Away: War scars each in its own way. You never fully recover, sometimes you can adapt yourself, but mostly you just submit the scars you have received; physical and emotional. “We will be superfluous to ourselves”. Looking up superfluous, Remarque seems to be saying we will be unnecessary or redundant to ourselves. What does he mean?

All Quiet on the Western Front Discussion Key Take-Aways:

1. This is an antiwar novel.
2. Policy is the prime reason for going to war but do policy makers understand the cost?
3. All are scarred by war.
4. Killing is personal and each person reacts (grieves) differently when they see it.

To the Discussion Leader:

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book All Quiet on the Western Front.