Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Islands of The Damned Discussion Guide –

This guide is intended to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book Islands of The Damned 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, and purpose.

Prep Work:

Be prepared to discuss the following selected reading from the book:
Chapter 2, pps. 42-44, 46-49
Chapter 3, pps. 72-83.
Chapter 4, pps. 111.
Chapter 5, pps. 130-139
Chapter 6, pps. 155-160, 168-179
Chapter 7, pps. 200, 205-208.
Chapter 8, pps. 231-236
Chapter 9, pps. 248-252
Chapter 10, pps. 276-278, 282-285
Watch the excerpts from the miniseries “The Pacific”.
Review MCDP-1 Warfighting and MCDP-3 Expeditionary Operations

Discussion Questions: All answers/responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion.

1. Why did R.V. Burgin join the Marine Corps?

   Key Take-Away: His motivation for joining can be compared to the many who joined due to the events on 11 Sept 2011. Readers also can discuss the pride of being a Marine and how society viewed Marines then compared to today.

2. Burgin tells stories of being made to march for hours and train repetitively for hours. Was he experiencing what Marines call the “harassment package” or were the hours of training and exhaustion worth the time?

   Key Take-Away: Later in the book, Burgin would give accounts of walking towards “the fight” for days in poor weather, scattered enemy, lack of supplies, and enormous fatigue. Endurance, operating in austerity, and with only what one can carry on their back can be discussed. Compliment this with readings about the expeditionary environment from MCDP-3.

3. The importance of leadership is emphasized when Burgin compares and contrasts two of his former Platoon Commanders (First Lieutenant Jones and Lieutenant “Legs”). Why were the officers so different? Which leader had the biggest impact on Burgin? The unit? Why?

   Key Take-Away: Emphasize the importance of standards and leadership and how they are equally important regardless of combat or garrison. Discussions regarding accountability and respect should occur. Discuss how positive and negative leadership shapes our behavior and opinions.
4. Throughout the book, Burgin talks about how friendly units mistakenly engaged other friendly units (fratricide). What led to this? How could have it been prevented? How can we prevent it today or is it just part of war?

   Key Take-Away: The environment (triple canopy jungle, mountains) and lack of proper equipment caused the loss of situational awareness on the battlefield. How do we prevent this from happening in a tropical, mountainous, urban environment? Will technology always work in the expeditionary environment (no GPS, ROVER Feed, generators, line of sight communications, etc.)? How do we deconflict the battlespace while integrating fires and maneuver in the expeditionary environment? How did Burgin do it?

5. Burgin talked about the “Banzai” and how Marines fixed bayonets and often times engaged in hand-to-hand combat. He also talked about his training and how it prepared him for this style of fighting. How well has the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program prepared you for the “up close and personal” fight? Have you maintained a level of fitness and competence to be victorious?

   Key Take-Away: Emphasize the need for physical fitness. PFT and CFT are a measure of fitness. Do Marines understand the importance of fitness and how it will help them in combat or are they solely reliant on the weapon system? Talk about physical and mental fitness and why they are important.

6. As Burgin moved around the Pacific, he talks of support from the Navy. Stories of Naval Gunfire, Close Air Support, Engineering and medical support are littered throughout the book. How big is the Navy’s role during amphibious operations? Do they just take us to the fight and stay on the ship? Are they less important than the Marines during combat operations?

   Key Take-Away: Discuss the Navy/Marine Corps team and how we compliment each other during amphibious operations. The importance of the Navy/Marine Corps relationship is vital in combat and in garrison. Discuss the relationship between the Commander Amphibious Task Force (CATF) and the Commander of Landing Forces (CLF).

7. Burgin returns home from his service in the Pacific and transitions to civilian life. Burgin tries to not think or talk about his service as a Marine in World War II until contacted by friends he had served with in the Pacific. His ability to reconnect with his fellow Marines appeared to rekindle his pride. Do we know of any Marines who have returned from combat and transitioned out of the Corps without having closure with combat experiences? As leaders, what is our role when our Marines begin the transition from combat deployments to civilian life?

   Key Take-Away: Burgin seemed to find closure when he connected with the First Marine Division Association. He had accidentally or purposefully forgotten about many of the experiences and people he had encountered during World War II. His return to the states and experience with Veteran Affairs was unsatisfactory. How connected are we with the Marines who suffer from PTSD or similar issues as they transition form the Corps to civilian life? When does our responsibilities cease? When should they cease? Why do they cease?

Islands of the Damned Key Takeaways:

1. Compare motivations, why be a Marine, the pride of being a Marine and how society views Marines.

2. Endurance, operating in austerity, and with only what one can carry on their back can be discussed, along with the expeditionary environment from MCDP-3.
3. Importance of standards and leadership and how they are equally important regardless of combat or garrison. Discussions regarding accountability and respect should occur. Positive and negative leadership shapes our behavior and opinions.

4. The environment (triple canopy jungle, mountains) and lack of proper equipment caused the loss of situational awareness on the battlefield. How do we prevent this from happening in a tropical, mountainous, urban environment? Will technology always work in the expeditionary environment (no GPS, ROVER Feed, generators, line of sight communications, etc.)? How do we deconflict the battlespace while integrating fires and maneuver in the expeditionary environment? How did Burgin do it?

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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 Islands of The Damned