Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- The Face of Battle DISCUSSION GUIDE -

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize ideas from the book *The Face of Battle*. All answers or 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 Marines 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. This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book *The Face of Battle*.

The point of this guide is to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book 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:**

- Any discussion of this book is best done after reading the entire work, so as to grasp the continuity of the nature of war over a long span of time.

- The book also lends itself to a series of discussions broken out over the major segments (battles) that make up the study
  - Agincourt
  - Waterloo
  - The Somme

- Alternatively, some discussion groups may want to focus on just a single segment of the book, as part of a broader discussion of topics such as: Medieval Warfare, Napoleonic Warfare, World War I.

- Note: I am not presenting page numbers, as there are so many editions of this work in print it is unlikely that everyone’s page numbers will correspond to each others.

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

1. What can the modern Marines draw out of the history of distant battles that are crucial to understanding modern conflict? If the answer is “not much”, lead the discussion towards how future historians might better tell the stories of Iraq in Afghanistan to help prepare future Marines.
Key Take Away – One can either learn from his or her own experience or through studying the experiences of others. The latter is often less painful.

2. Keegan was one of the first historians to try and explain battles through a bottom-up approach, rather than through the eyes of senior commanders. This approach has some drawbacks, the most serious of which is that conflict is at its most confusing at the level he is trying to relate. Based on your own experience, including hard training, do you think any historian can capture the true nature of a major battle at the tactical level? If so, did Keegan’s work transform how you will view and study historical battles… how so? If you believe it is impossible to capture all the complex actions and motivations of any battle after the event, explain why. Moreover, is there a way to better understand conflicts so as to make them worthy of future study?

Key Take-Away – Battles are nasty, brutish, horrifying, complicated, confusing ordeals. Trying to capture all of what goes into a battle into a coherent narrative is a daunting task, one that makes overcoming Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle easy be comparison. For, a historian not only has to decipher positions and movements, but also why every participant is behaving in a particular way over the course of long battle.

3. At Agincourt, a heavily outnumbered English Army stood firm against repeated charges of fearsome French cavalry. At Waterloo, no British square broke despite hours of pounding an assault. At the Somme, British units went forward all day despite murderous fire that caused 60,000 casualties within hours.

a. What causes men to stand with their brothers though the odds of survival appear slim, or at least heavily weighted against them?

b. How do leaders maintain unit integrity, and a willingness to continue the fight, even under the most horrific and trying conditions?

c. What can senior leaders do before and during a battle to assist junior leaders in keeping their Marines focused on accomplishing the mission even under horrific conditions and terrible stress?

Key Take-Away: Battle is the most stressful experience a Marine will ever encounter. If one is to survive and carry on it is crucial to first explore the realities of combat, and then prepare to face these conditions. Throughout the history of the Marine Corps, great things have been accomplished by small numbers of Marines, because they stayed together, watched out for each other, listened to their leaders, and kept going forward… always, everywhere, and under any conditions. It take a special kind of person to go forward, and it take a special kind of leader to take them forward. It takes MARINES.

4. What common virtues and vices did those soldiers fighting at Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme share? Were these soldiers merely mirrors of their own the societies of their time and location, or are there some universal truths about being a professional Soldier or Marine, that transcend time and geographic location?
5. Throughout the battles covered by Keegan, one can see how changes in technology dramatically impacted the character of war. From the “arrow storm” at Agincourt, to massed muskets and artillery at Waterloo, to the dominance of the machinegun at the Somme, technology dictated how men would fight. How has the rapid advance of technology since the Somme revolutionized warfare in the modern era, and how what difference in fighting methods have changed as result? For instance, as technology made battlefields more deadly, units have spread out. Today the field at Waterloo might be held by a platoon, or possibly a squad. How have the changes spurred by modern technology changed your approach to combat and combat leadership?

Key Take-Away: Technology is always changing and advancing. Though some things about combat remain timeless (fear, confusion), others are in constant flux. We study history not so much to retell events, but to see how others have coped with changes in the character of war. For, he who adapts to technological changes first and most efficiently wins.

6. *The Face of Battle* is filled with countless insights and thought provoking passages. For instance, when it comes to charging an intact infantry square with its bayonets pointing forward, the bravery of the rider counts for nothing. All that matters is the bravery of the horse, and a horse will not impale itself on a shiny piece of steel! What passages of the book made each of you stop and think, which gave you a new appreciation for the study of warfare and battle… which, if any, made you say, “Ah-ha”?

(Discussion Leader: Go around the group, and let each Marine share something in the book that made some kind of an impact on him or her. Draw them out.)

Key Take-Aways:

1. One can either learn from his or her own experience or through studying the experiences of others. The latter is often less painful.
2. Battles are nasty, brutish, horrifying, complicated, confusing ordeals. Trying to capture all of what goes into a battle into a coherent narrative is a daunting task, one that makes overcoming Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle easy be comparison. For, a historian not only has to decipher positions and movements, but also why every participant is behaving in a particular way over the course of long battle.
3. Battle is the most stressful experience a Marine will ever encounter. If one is to survive and carry on it is crucial to first explore the realities of combat, and then prepare to face these conditions. Throughout the history of the Marine Corps, great things have been accomplished by small numbers of Marines, because they stayed together, watched out for each other, listened to their leaders, and kept going forward… always, everywhere, and under any conditions. It take a special kind of person to go forward, and it take a special kind of leader to take them forward. It takes MARINES.
4. Technology is always changing and advancing. Though some things about combat remain timeless (fear, confusion), others are in constant flux. We study history not so much to retell events, but to see how others have coped with changes in the character of war. For, he who adapts to technological changes first and most efficiently wins.

To the Discussion Leader:

Encourage the Marines 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.