Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- *Achilles in Vietnam* Discussion Guide -

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize ideas from the book *Achilles in Vietnam*. 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 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. This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book *Achilles in Vietnam*. The key is to stay focused on Achilles’ experiences and how they transcend time and relate to experiences of modern Marine combat veterans.

Be prepared to deal with the underlying issues, concerns and/or the trauma of the participants that may surface during discussions

**Prep Work:**

1. Read the entire book.

2. Review and focus on the excerpts of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) interviews.

3. Consider watching the movies “Achilles” and “Platoon”.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What inspired Jonathan Shay to write this book and why is he qualified to write it?

   **Key Take-Away:** According to the book’s introduction, Dr. Shay is a psychiatrist for a group of American combat veterans of the Vietnam War who have severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He has day-to-day, face-to-face, years of experience with these veterans. He understands what caused the trauma and has learned the resulting psychology of the trauma.

2. Why is it important to parallel Achilles’ experiences with the experiences of modern warriors?

   **Key Take-Away:** While the weaponry and tactics are different the basic experience is the same. It allows them to realize their warrior experience transcends time and they are not anomalies.

3. What does the ancient Greek word *themis* mean and what does it mean to you?

   **Key Take-Away:** *Themis* literally means “what’s right.” In this case, it means the precepts, concepts, and accepted actions imbedded by culture, and how they relate to pre-combat assumptions. It can be different from individual to individual.
4. What does the ancient Greek word *geras* mean and what does it mean to you?

Key Take-Away: *Geras* literally means “portion of honor.” What is honor? What does it mean to the individual and what is it worth to the individual? Answers to this question are vital to the rest of the discussion. Note, there are no right or wrong answers but individual answers should provide insight into each Marine’s beliefs about the meaning of honor.

5. Do you believe danger is to be mutually shared by all ranks?

Key Take-Away: Encourage your Marines to think about the consequences of their actions/decisions above and below them. Guide your Marines to the fact that there are times when you need to explain your vision so juniors don’t think you are using them.

6. What is the ancient Greek word *menis* and what does it mean to you?

Key Take-Away: *Menis* literally means “indignant wrath.” Indignant wrath is very personal and generally aimed up the chain of command and/or the enemy. It often occurs due to sense of betrayal. Discuss how to prevent it and how to deal with it.

7. Is there such a thing as special camaraderie?

Key Take-Away: Discuss the bonds of comrades at arms. Discuss what happens when those bonds are broken by any reason.

8. Is it okay to mourn?

Key Take-Away: Yes. Discuss mourning for fallen friends, family members, or loved ones.

9. What is luck and how does it play into deprivation, life and death?

Key Take-Away: A major part of luck or chance can be reduced with training, leadership, and unit cohesion. The effects may or may not correlate to the type of unit you serve with.

10. Should you dishonor the enemy?

Key Take-Away: Do not dehumanize the enemy. Learn how to treat them as enemy combatants according to the law of war.

11. Do personal beliefs impact individual performance?

Key Take-Away: This question could be interpreted as a faith based question. But it actually relates to the belief or faith an individual has in their country, Service Component, individual unit and the individuals closest to them. The confidence in all these levels needs to be secure or at least understood.

12. Is ‘the breaking point’ a reality?

Key Take-Away: Acknowledge that there are legitimate psychological/psychiatric injuries or casualties. These injuries or casualties do not equate to bad or weak character.
Achilles in Vietnam Discussion Key Take-Aways:

1. Combat can make everything you believed was right to seem wrong and everything you believed to be wrong to seem right.

2. Strong leadership, consistent unit cohesion and complete confidence in each other are vital to the individual Marine’s psychological survival and performance in combat.

3. Marines need to understand the concepts of “what’s right”, “portion of honor” and “indignant wrath”.

4. Psychological and psychiatric casualties are as real as physical wounds.

5. Leadership Principle # 3: Know your Marines and look out for their welfare; has to be more than rote or memorized words.