Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why All Quiet on the Western Front?

“This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.”

-epigraph to the novel

1. Why this book is on the CMC’s Reading List? This book is on the reading list because it highlights the human dimension of war (MCDP 1: “…war is a human enterprise”). Men must always realize that war is an instrument of policy, but must never discount the human dimensions of war. This book was written as an anti-war novel. It follows the war experience of Paul Baumer and his school mates during World War I. Remarque, through Paul, describes the horrors of war and how it affects men psychologically and physically. He also paints a picture of how the experience of war will always be with them through the rest of their lives and that if those responsible for deciding to go to war truly understood the horrors, they would never start another war. It is the story of lost childhood and of gained love for his fellow soldiers (comradeship): feelings no one could understand unless they too had experienced battle.

2. Why is this book important to you? All decisions have consequences. We talk about commanders accepting risk, but is it truly their risk? Or are they simply accepting risk for young Marines; that truly changes the perspective. All Marines should read this book to gain the perspective on the Marine at the tip of the spear. It is not real to you unless you have experienced it. War is not a video game, it is palpable and real. “Because war is a clash between opposing human wills, the human dimension is central in war”[MCDP 1]. As Clausewitz suggests a pair of wrestlers, Paul experiences his own personal imprint of war when he kills Gerard Duval and has to watch him die over the course of a few days (actually one of the longest singular sections of the book). Up to this point he has simply tried to exist as best he could with his circle of classmates from his town.

3. Things to think about. While reading note how disconnected Paul’s reality in war becomes from the reality of his past. Look at authority figures throughout the book. Do they really understand what is going on or are they simply fooling themselves. Who actually IS getting something from this; the military-industrial complex? Politicians? The last page of the book sums up how Paul has lived and how he finally died. “He had fallen forward and lay on the earth as though sleeping. Turning him over one saw that he could not have suffered long; his face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come.” His immediate death may not have been while suffering, but he suffered until the day he died; the calm may have been for the life he would have had to live and now had been released from.

“Ah! Mother, Mother! You still think I am a child - why can I not put my head in your lap and weep? Why have I always to be strong and self-controlled? I would like to weep and be comforted too, indeed I am little more than a child; in the wardrobe still hang short, boy’s trousers - it is such a little time ago, why is it over?”