

Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why *Fields of Fire*? –

“That’s after a month. Or two. But Lieutenant. When you do it for six, or nine, or even longer, by Christ. You’ll never shake it”.

-- That quote came from a Major talking to a lieutenant before he went into Vietnam and joined his men in the fight. This quote sums up the book and hooked the reviewer. The brotherhood that had formed in these Marines in combat was something only someone who had been in combat would understand. This quote directly aligns with the last chapter of the book when Senator went home and was taking pain pills even though he was not in pain. He was never going to be able to forget about what he did or what he had seen while he fought in Vietnam.

In today’s Marine Corps the majority of senior leadership has been to war or at least deployed to a combat zone. Young and mid-career Marines have also “seen the elephant” or are living in a Marine Corps surrounded by combat veterans. This book revolves around a few main characters, but Lieutenant Hodges seems to be one of the main characters. If younger officer and enlisted Marines read this, they would see how hard it is for a young officer leading men in combat for the first time. They would be able to see dynamic tempo in war and how different it is from training. *Fields of Fire* is a reminder to senior leadership of the perspective of the young Marine, his or her view on this “new world” they are operating in, and the combat maturing he or she are going through. In today’s Marine Corps of combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, does *Fields of Fire* provide a unifying vehicle for senior and junior Marines to come together in understanding how experience and maturing are part of the development of effective Marine Corps leadership?

The dynamic of war is ever changing but more importantly is the dynamic of the people in war. Hodges being the Platoon Commander was green as could be but turned out to be a warrior and a great leader. Platoon member Snake had always had a troubled life turned out to be a great squad leader. Senator had the pedigree of a Harvard graduate, never wanted to be in Vietnam but stayed and fought because he had to. As a leader reading this book we can all think back to the Marines whom have been under our charge and remember that all had different personalities. At the end of the day it did not matter because all that was important was mission accomplishment.

Things to think about while reading this book: the dynamics or war and the character and quality of people who fight in it. Different walks of life, different perspectives, different politics, different motivations, but they all had the common bond of being Marines. The book did not have a lot of decision points concerning direct combat – in other words, not a great deal of tactical solutions and TTPs. However, it offers a wide variety of “leader decision points,” for leaders and followers to think about and understand ways to deal with different personalities. These lessons are universal, and apply to today’s battlefield as well as the jungles of Vietnam: How hard was it (and is it) for the Marines to deal with orders coming from a secure tent, safe beyond the fray, telling them to go put themselves in harm’s way (See the HBO miniseries “Band of Brothers” for examples of this in WWII, as well)? How do you deal with a Platoon Sergeant who cares more about your haircut and shave than the tactics you and your Marines are employing? How do you deal with the tragedies of battlefield loss in the middle of the battle? While reading this book, put your leadership hat on and try to envision yourself in these scenarios and think about what you would do.