Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society by Dave Grossman -

“War means fighting and fighting means killing.”

-Nathan Bedford Forrest

First published in 1995, On Killing by retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman is a ground-breaking and provocative attempt to shine a light on a subject long considered taboo. Truly the first modern attempt to study the “psychology of killing” and its effects on individuals and society, the author also does a great service in highlighting and exploring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is worth recalling that this pioneering work was completed before the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing conflicts that have led to a much wider and deeper awareness of PTSD. Grossman’s controversial thesis is backed by an array of statistics, historical examples, and poignant personal narratives. He asserts that all humans exhibit a natural aversion to killing, that training, using various forms of operant conditioning and socialization can overcome this hesitancy and in fact produce ready and willing killers, and that extending this process to American society has been profoundly damaging. The result is a harrowing examination of a subject that is of great interest to a large audience, and is especially relevant to the class of professional warriors that must come to grips with killing as a matter of course.

For the Marine there is much to wrestle with in On Killing and a subsequent text by the author published in 2004 titled On Combat (Also on the Commandant’s Professional Reading List for Gunnery Sergeants). How should Marines approach the inevitable calling of their profession, to potentially kill their fellow humans? What should they expect in combat? How should they train? How should Marines prepare themselves, their fellow Marines, and their families? While these questions apply to Marines at all levels, they are particularly relevant for small unit leaders, including Staff Non-Commissioned Officers and company grade officers who will have to lead Marines through these perils and face them directly themselves. Ultimately, On Killing may lead the reader to more questions than answers, but Marines will undoubtedly benefit from grappling with these and many more existential questions raised by the book.

The title, evocative of Clausewitz’s On War, seeks to portray the book as the definitive text on the topic of “Killology” as Grossman coins the new term. Readers will of course have to make that determination for themselves, but Grossman’s contribution to the study of killing is immense and enduring. On Killing is likely the single best place for Marines to start exploring this fundamental and unavoidable issue.