Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *The Face of Battle*? -

*The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage; always of leadership, usually of obedience; always of compulsion, sometimes of insubordination; always of anxiety, sometimes of elation or catharsis; always of uncertainty and doubt, misinformation and misapprehension, usually also of faith and sometimes of vision; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity and usually of disintegration for it is towards the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed.*

Possibly once in a generation, a book comes along that changes everything. One such a book – John Keegan’s *Face of Battle* – fundamentally changed how historians look at war and battle. Prior to *Face of Battle*, historians told the story of conflict through the actions of commanders, strategy, and tactics. What they rarely, if ever, discussed was the reality of combat as experienced by the thousands of soldiers locked in mortal struggle. While this kind of “bottom-up” retelling of history is popular today, it was a breakthrough approach in 1976, and remains best-in-class. To tell his story, Keegan examines three battles (Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme) spanning five-hundred years of military history. Though his initial approach to each battle is of the standard variety, he rapidly moves on to a discussion of the close-in chaos of the battlefield. In doing so, he reveals many brilliant insights that generations of historians had completely missed. What are they? Delve into this wonderful volume and experience the revelations for yourself.

By taking a human-driven approach to the study of battle, Keegan takes the reader deep into three of the most consequential battles in history. His unique approach clearly demonstrates war’s unchanging nature even as the character of war has radically changed. It is only through gaining an understanding of the nature of war and how it effects battlefield outcomes that today’s warriors and their leaders can gain the insights necessary for understanding modern warfare. By understanding why the English archers did not turn and run as heavily armored French knights closed on their position; or, why the no British square broke at Waterloo despite hours of incessant assaults; or, why, despite losing 60,000 men in single a morning, the British infantry still went forward, one can begin to comprehend what it takes to build and maintain *esprit de corps* under even the most horrific battlefield conditions.

Through its unique approach to understanding historical conflicts, *Face of Battle* provides a foundational edifice for one’s future study of warfare. As you read it, pay careful attention to how little technological change affects the essence of what it takes to lead warriors into battle. At the same time, pay close attention to how, in each of these battles, the failure of one side to adapt to new technologies and methods of war handicapped their efforts from the start.

*Face of Battle* is a book that belongs in every professional library.