Commandant’s Professional Reading List
- Why Read *The Killer Angels*? -

__J.L. Chamberlain, a major character, recalls reciting to his father the speech from Hamlet: "What a piece of work is man...in action how like an angel!" The father comments, "Well, boy, if he's an angel, he's sure a murderin' angel."__

First things first, this book is a novel! Many historians are disturbed by that fact, but the reason Marines should read this book is specifically for that reason. It is a very easy read, and the real beauty of it is Shaara builds each character for the reader to follow. He takes some literary license with some of the actual history (e.g. Chamberlain’s position during Day three), but the rest of his license is with the characters and what they felt and understood during the battle. The best thing about his book is it brings characters to life which can create a true desire to read more about real Civil War history in a reader who may have had no earlier interest in that period of our history. You can find some companion pieces to the novel that ‘debunk’ the fallacies, but I also found them to be an attempt to debunk the character sketches in the novel which, depending on your point of view, change when you add the rest of the story for yourself. Even though it is a novel, it paints a very credible picture of the people and a theory of how they interacted in battle and throughout the conflict.

Michael Shaara brings each character to life based on his lifelong research of papers and letters. Why did Lee do what he did (attack the middle after both flanks failed)? None may really know as he died just five years after the war ended. Did Longstreet really believe in the strength of the defense (as stated by Clausewitz and our own MCDP 1)? Longstreet espoused the defense after the war but may not have done so during this particular battle. It is the relationships where Shaara makes money for this historical novel. Because some historians disagree with him does not mean it is not worth reading. In my own journey of learning, this book opened up twenty years and counting of reading about the civil war; it is definitely worth the time.

For many readers, the best sequence in the book is the stand of the 20th Maine and Col Joshua Chamberlain. It is a breathless, heart pumping visual word picture of a famous stand of man against man. It is very easy to get caught up in the battle during this very well done piece of literary fiction.

Look at the characters in this book. How do they interact with each other? How do they interact with their subordinates? How do they approach failure? How do they approach success? What are their personal problems? Are they affected by lack of rest?

“The energy failed. He felt himself flicker. But it was a long slow falling, very quiet, very peaceful, rather still, but always the motion, the darkness closing in, and so he fell out of the light and far away, far away, and was gone.”

The death of Gen Armistead; *The Killer Angels*