Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *Battle Leadership*? -

“The situations that confront one in war are generally obscure, highly complicated and never conform to type. They must be met by an alert mind, untrammeled by set forms and fixed ideas….Let us kill everything stereotyped; otherwise it will kill us.”

Captain Adolf Von Schell, *Battle Leadership*, page 64

Captain Adolf Von Schell’s experiences during and after World War I provide insight into many enduring topics of Marine Corps leadership. His ability to identify warfighters’ behavior in response to combat and peacetime circumstances introduces human factors influencing individual and unit proficiency. Yet, his level of detail requires readers to compare historical and current events based on their own experiences. *Battle Leadership* reminds Marines that success hinges on our ability to assess people, situations, and strategies to determine the best course of action at every level of operations.

Officers benefit from Von Schell’s rationale for developing situational awareness ranging from the individual perspective through organizational intent and actual circumstances to develop creative solutions. This information helps officers create a unit structure reflective of the decentralization introduced on pages 59-61 of *MCDP 1, Warfighting* to guard against complacent “professional interest” Von Schell mentions on page 88 and maintain individual and unit readiness. By exposing Marines to evolving conditions, they begin to embrace uncertainty, assess situations, anticipate the consequences of executing a course of action, and take the responsibility of justifying and learning from their actions. As Von Schell advises, successful application of this strategy requires mastering the key skill of identifying the Marines within their unit who can be trusted to execute orders, who will carry out the intent, and who resists without justification. *Battle Leadership* presents leadership insights like these through lessons learned by a combat officer.

Readers should keep in mind that unconventional strategies like Von Schell’s account of a corporal standing up a platoon of cows to watch for enemy movement have changed battlefield momentum for centuries and strive to develop similar creative thinking. To experience the greatest benefit from this book, compare the scenarios with current events and warfighting doctrine to identify applicability within the unit. Acknowledge that the days of “just as much time for preparation as I consider necessary” (p. 91) are over. Continually work to develop the knowledge that enables timely decision-making necessary to respond effectively to the “kaleidoscopic [nature of war] replete with constantly changing, unexpected, confusing situations” (p. 63) and prepare each of your Marines to serve as a leader to generate the “element of surprise [that works] for us in war” (p. 47).