Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *The Red Badge of Courage*? –

The Red Badge of Courage is required reading for Marine Corps recruits and poolees. It’s a classic piece of fictional literature that allows the reader to share a young Union Army soldier’s psychological journey during a particular experience in the American Civil War. The soldier struggles internally to mend a previous decision to run from an attacking enemy force. Its significance to the Marine Corps involves the connection between the soldiers’ experience and one, if not all, of the Marine Corps Values: Honor, Courage, and Commitment.

Albeit fiction, this book is important to read because it involves several basic elements of leadership that are important to all Marines that, if not prepared for, can further increase the complexity of war at the tactical level. The elements in question include keeping your Marines informed, the significance of molding a unit to a level that fosters loyalty amongst its members, the mental preparation the nature of war, and courage under fire. Unlike other material which may focus specifically on actions at the unit level, this story centers around one lone soldier and his particular experiences and personal growth which is not too far removed from the experiences that a young Marine may encounter in a combat situation.

While reading the story it’s important to keep in mind the following:

1. Though not explicitly clear in the story, the time and place of the story is presumably centered after the disastrous Union Army’s loss at Fredericksburg and just before their re-crossing of the Rappahannock River due to their loss at Chancellorsville.

2. The discontent with the generalship by the Union soldiers following consistent losses at the hands of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in the eastern theatre of the Civil War.

3. The nature of war. It is complex, violent, cruel, unpredictable and how shocking it can be to our youth when uncovered.

4. The fog of war that hinders effective actions is an attribute of war and regardless of technological improvements, is just as prevalent today as it was in the 1800s.