Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *First to Fight*? -

“...still, in terms of cold mechanical logic, the United States does not need a Marine Corps. However, for good reasons, which completely transcend cold logic, the United States wants a Marine Corps.”

—*First to Fight*

*First to Fight: An Inside View of the U. S. Marine Corps* by Lt. Gen. Victor H. Krulak was published in 1984. It is one of the classic descriptions of the Marine Corps and its ethos, and why the Corps retains a special place in the hearts of the American people. In Krulak’s words, “This book, therefore, is an effort to set down what I perceive to be the qualities that have caused the Marine Corps to survive and flourish.” Part history, part autobiography, Krulak starts with the following thesis: While America may not need a Marine Corps, America wants a Marine Corps. He then describes three things America believes about the Marine Corps:

- When trouble comes to our country there will be Marines who will have kept themselves ready to do something about it and will do it.
- When Marines go to war they turn in a performance that is dramatically and decisively successful.
- Our Corps is downright good for the manhood of our country.

Drawing from history and his own personal experience, Krulak describes key events in the history of our Corps. These events helped shape America’s beliefs about its Marine Corps. There are six parts: The Thinkers, The Innovators, The Improvisers, The Penny Pinchers, The Brothers, and The Fighters.

While this book describes events and characters from Marine Corps history, it is really about the impact events and people have on the Corps as an institution. The book would be of interest to any Marine, but the topics Krulak deals with are more at the Headquarters Marine Corps/General Officer or Colonel level. In part one, “The Thinkers,” for example, Krulak describes the efforts of a group of senior officers informally known as the “Chowder Society.” They work to support the commandant in the battles involving the president, the secretary of defense, Congress and the other services. As such, the book is correctly included on the list for captains who already have an understanding of Marine Corps history and the organization of the Corps as higher echelons. It would also be a good read for a staff noncommissioned officer.

As you read the book, the first question to consider is the thesis raised by Krulak: America does not need a Marine Corps, America wants a Marine Corps. This book was written 30 years ago. Is his thesis still true? Other important questions to consider as you read this book:

- The Thinkers: Do threats to the Corps’ existence still exist?
- The Innovators: What were some of the formidable conceptual, tactical and material problems that the innovators of the pre-World War II era had to overcome to be able to conduct amphibious operations?
- The Improvisers: How did the Marine Corps essentially recreate the 1st Marine Division from an understrength skeleton to a combat force in time to conduct the critical landing at Inchon?
- The Penny Pinchers: The Corps has a reputation for frugality. Do individual Marines ever suffer from our penny-pinching ways?
- The Brothers: Review the paragraph from the 1921 Marine Corps Manual written by Gen. Lejeune on page 157. Does our Corps still live up to this philosophy? What are some examples of various tenets in action today?
- The Fighters: From page 175: “Of the various enduring faces that have come to distinguish the Corps, the first to emerge was the conviction that fighting was its business, conflict its way of life.” What are some examples of events that have fostered the reputation of Marines as fighters?