Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *Into the Tiger’s Jaw*, by LtGen Frank E. Peterson? -

“There is a need for a “first”, but we Americans tend to glamorize the black or minority associated with an event. These titles give me a bit of a hang up.”

-LtGen. Frank E. Peterson

Many a Marine General Officer shared similar career progressions and successes after entering the service following World War II and serving through to the late 20th century. This time period experienced the transition from the Korean War to the jet age, and through the Vietnam and the Cold Wars. Also in this era, the United States uniformed services transitioned through the very difficult evolution of race integration and the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. None experienced it more firsthand than LtGen Frank E. Peterson who, as young black Marine officer in 1951, led the way for minorities in the Marine Corps. He became not only one of the first black Marine officers, but the first black Marine aviator. This book depicts the trials and successes of his Marine Corps career and lays out the friction and obstacles he experienced, both from the establishment inside the Marine Corps and those in his personal life. The book describes how he was able to persevere through these trials and tribulations, capitalize on his own personal drive and absorb the input of several mentors along the way in order to achieve success; sometimes at a great cost to his own personal life. The book doesn’t delve deep into the aviation challenges he faced and focuses more on the many racial roadblocks that he and other black officers encountered in the Marine Corps. As a historical perspective, this book does well to show how that change was so important to the United States Marine Corps, as well as America.

This book gave the reader a look into the mindset of the Marine Corps and the reader does get a real sense of the differences of thought during the early days of integration, inside and outside of the Marine Corps. The description of events preceding LtGen Peterson’s admission into the Naval Aviation program, and his assignments following flight school served to illustrate the feelings and opinions of those in and around LtGen Peterson at the early onset of this era. Although LtGen Peterson’s successes in aviation were admirable, they are not relatable to all Marines. However, the reader does learn the evolution and struggles of the Marine Corps throughout the second half of the last century. LtGen Peterson acceptance and non-acceptance at officers clubs and base housing illustrated his day-to-day prosecutions. Those who attempted to railroad him out at certain junctures in his career also framed his struggles. Again, his own perseverance during these events, and some fortunate and well-placed guidance from those who were going through similar experiences, allowed him to progress through the ranks and achieve the many firsts that came with being the first black aviator.

Through the eyes of its first black aviator, *Into the Tiger’s Jaw* highlighted the Marine Corps’ transition through race integration. Although many believe that these thoughts and opinions may be largely gone in America, this book is a historical perspective of one man’s plight, reminding readers of the history that made the Marine Corps of today. Minority Marines today may not be faced with the same obstructions or biases that LtGen Peterson faced, but there may still be other dogmas and perceptions still to face and fight through to succeed.