Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *Defeat into Victory*? -

“A general who has taken part in a campaign is by no means best fitted to write its history. That, if it is to be complete and unbiased, should be the work of someone less personally involved. Yet such a general might write something of value. He might, as honestly as he could, tell of the problems he faced, why he took the decisions he did, what helped, what hindered, the luck he had, the mistakes he made. He might, by showing how one man attempted the art of command, be of use to those who later may themselves have to exercise it. He might even give, to those who have not experienced it, some impression of what it feels like to shoulder a commander’s responsibilities in war. These things I have tried to do in this book.”

Field Marshal Sir William Slim

Slim’s *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* is widely recognized as one of the finest military memoirs in the modern era. Originally published in 1956, Slim based the book on a “skeleton diary” that he kept over the course of the campaign. The first edition sold out within a few days. This initial popularity was sustained in the decades to follow, and the book is still highly regarded by both the general public and military professionals. The attributes that particularly distinguish Slim’s work are candor, humility, and readability. In these ways, *Defeat into Victory* outstrips the competition in this genre, to include Grant’s *Memoirs*.

The central themes of teamwork and of making due with limited resources under exceptionally challenging circumstances will be familiar to Marines of all ranks and are in consonance with the enduring tenets of MCDP-1, *Warfighting*. Slim demonstrates a keen expeditionary mindset, repeatedly making “chicken salad out of chicken crap” to accomplish the mission against a determined enemy. Likewise, his empowerment of subordinates and personal attention to the purpose of each mission – his Commander’s Intent – foreshadow the foundational elements of Maneuver Warfare.

Ultimately, however, this is a book about leadership and decision-making. It also serves as a poignant reminder of the primacy of the human dimension in war and of the importance of intangible factors – will, morale, *esprit de corps* – in determining the victor. Details regarding the Burma campaign, while interesting, simply provide the backdrop for Slim to impart his thoughts on leadership and command. To that end, Marine Corps leaders, particularly senior leaders, will find pearls of wisdom sown throughout the text. The author’s thoughts on leadership and command are as applicable today as they were when the book was first published. In this way, Slim resoundingly accomplished his stated goal of passing on those enduring lessons to “those who later may themselves have to exercise the art of command.”