Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *Achilles in Vietnam* -

Every instance of severe traumatic psychological injury is a standing challenge to the rightness of the social order.

- Judith Lewis Herman,

*Achilles in Vietnam* was written by Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., a psychiatrist for a group of American combat veterans of the Vietnam War with severe, chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His book compares the combat trauma of Akhilleus (Achilles) in Homer’s Iliad with the combat trauma of the American Vietnam combat veteran.

Reading *Achilles in Vietnam* is an excellent way to accept the reality of psychiatric and psychological injuries and wounds. It refutes the common belief that they are due to weak or bad character and that warriors should ‘just suck it up and deal with it’. It validates Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of prolonged exposure to combat and the violent behavior resulting from the failure to prevent and/or properly treat it. It demonstrates that the USMC warrior ethos is as old as warriors themselves. By comparing the lessons learned from Achilles with the experiences of these Vietnam veterans and their own knowledge and experience of combat stresses, Marines will realize that ancient warriors were no different than today’s warriors. To quote Thomas E. Neven, “Shay’s astute analysis of the human psyche and his inventive linking of his patients’ symptoms to the actions of characters in Homer’s classic story make this book well worth reading for anyone who would lead troops in both peace and war.”

Marines reading this book will gain insights and appreciation into the thought processes of individuals under the stress of prolonged combat. They will learn that the experience of combat can make people believe that everything they held dear and right is suddenly wrong and everything they believed to be wrong is now right. Combat can make values and beliefs that once seemed black or white become gray. Yet caring, thoughtful and consistent leadership can help Marines work through this gray impression, reduce trauma and help abate, although not cure, psychological injuries.

This book also addresses the concepts of rightness, honor and wrath in combat and post combat. It encourages Marines to think about what these terms mean to them and how they apply them as individuals and as part of a unit. It offers opportunities to think about Leadership Principles and how their use or non-use can have an impact on individuals and units as well as the outcomes of combat.