Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- The Defence of Duffer’s Drift Discussion Guide -

This guide is intended to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book The Defence of Duffer’s Drift with their own perspectives on warfighting, and come out of this session or sessions of small group PME with a better sense of history, identity, and purpose.

Prep Work:

1. Read all 72 pages of the book.

Background:

1. The author, Major General Ernest D Swinton was considered one of the most forward-thinking minds of the British Army during the World War I era. He was instrumental in the design and implementation of the tank in WWI and is credited with coining the word “Tank” as a code name for the armored vehicle commonly called by that name. He was also a visionary in the use of aviation in warfare and wrote of it prior to WWI. He served in the Second Boer War (1899-1901) as a Captain. The Defence of Duffer’s Drift is an allegorical story set in the Second Boer War. Though the narrative is written with whimsy and humor, the topic itself is very serious. In this short story, we see a young British Officer evolve through a process of trial and error to determine a suitable solution to the tactical problem with which he is presented.

2. The story unfolds as a series of six dreams in the mind of the protagonist, Lieutenant Backsight Forethought (BF). The setting is a ford in the Silliaasvogel River in the Second Boer War. It begins with BF standing on the banks of the river with detachment of 50 soldiers and NCOs watching his column disappear over the horizon. He has been left behind to protect the column’s rear by defending the only natural ford in which wheeled traffic could cross for miles. In the first dream, the detachment is ignobly overrun and captured by the Boer force with significant loss. In each successive dream, BF has no memory of specific events, but does carry specific lessons learned from the previous dreams into the next. So with each new dream, the scene is “re-set” and starts all over, but BF has more lessons learned to help him build a better defense. Each dream except the sixth ends in failure, though the results are progressively less disastrous for the detachment. Finally, in the sixth dream, BF applies all of the lessons learned and achieves success; though realistically, fog and friction do not allow his plan to succeed without some setbacks and adjustments. The story is intended to bring the reader along on the protagonists journey and allows the reader to evaluate all the decisions made by the protagonist based upon his own knowledge and training.

Discussion Questions: All answers / responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion.

1. How would you describe Lieutenant Backsight Forethought at the beginning of the first dream?

   Key Take-Away: There is no place for complacency in an uncertain environment. A leader must always assume the enemy will follow the most dangerous course of action and take steps to counter it.

2. Did the column leave Lieutenant Backsight Forethought with adequate resources to accomplish his mission; did he properly use what he had? If so, why and if not, why not?
Key Take-Away: The leader must use any and all resources at his disposal to prepare for his operation. Planning, camouflage and position improvement are continuous and iterative.

3. In 1988, an updated version of the story called The Defense of Hill 781 was written by James R. McDonough. The setting is the U.S. Army’s National Training Center (NTC) and the protagonist is a Battalion sized Armored Task Force commander defending against the notorious OPFOR. In the mid-1980s, it was widely believed that the next war would be a large-scale armored conflict and that small-scale isolated infantry engagements were unlikely. Which story is more relevant today; The Defence of Duffer’s Drift, or The Defense of Hill 781? Why?

Key Take-Away: All conflict across the range of military operations (ROMO) is always possible. We cannot predict what the next conflict will be like based upon the last conflict or the type of equipment we currently employ.

4. If you were to write a version of this story that occurs in the present time, what would be the setting, who would be the protagonist, and what would be the mission?

Key Take-Away: As we progress toward more distributed operations with a more professional force, we can expect more responsibility to be delegated to SNCOs and junior officers.

5. Lieutenant Backsight Forethought carried a total of 22 lessons into his final dream. Are these lessons of over a century ago still relevant today? Which ones if any and why?

Key Take-Away: Though weapons, equipment and specific actions may change, fundamentals span the ages.

6. The seventh lesson reads, “It is not business to allow lazy men (even though they be brothers and neutrals) to sit and pick their teeth outside their kraals whilst tired soldiers are breaking their hearts trying to do heavy labour in short time. It is more the duty of a soldier to teach the lazy neutral the dignity of labour, and by keeping him under guard to prevent his going away to talk about it.” (Some older printings may have more offensive language.) Is this an acceptable practice today? If, not, what is?

Key Take-Away: This could turn into an argument over political correctness. While it is important to not turn neutrals into enemies, this must be tempered with ever-present threat that there may already be enemies among them.

7. Are there any lessons that have absolutely no relevance today? Why?

Key Take-Away: This is an open-ended question. Encourage your Marines to talk it through and see if they can find a modern parallel that applies to the archaic language or concept.

8. Does this sequence of dreams resemble any processes in use by the Marine Corps today?

Key Take-Away: Another open-ended question, but this would be a good time to discuss the concept of war gaming during planning, and possibly the Marine Corps Lessons Learned System.
The Defence of Duffer’s Drift Key Take-Aways:

1. There is no place for complacency in an uncertain environment. A leader must always assume the enemy will follow the most dangerous course of action and take steps to counter it.

2. The leader must use any and all resources at his disposal to prepare for his operation. Planning, camouflage and position improvement are continuous and iterative.

3. All conflict across the ROMO is always possible. We cannot predict what the next conflict will be like based upon the last conflict or the type of equipment we currently employ.

4. As we progress toward more distributed operations with a more professional force, we can expect more responsibility to be delegated to SNCOs and Junior officers.

5. Though weapons, equipment and specific actions may change, fundamentals span the ages.

6. While it is important to not turn neutrals into enemies, this must be tempered with ever-present threat that there may already be enemies among them.

To the Discussion Leader:

Encourage the Marine to read, from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book Rifleman Dodd.