

# A Warrior's Mind

How to better understand the “art” of war

by MajGen W.F. Mullen III

I was reading the titles of the articles in my daily Real Clear Defense email and came across one that truly struck a chord with me. Australian MAJGEN named Mick Ryan published his yearly list of war books. Like me, he is an avid student of his profession and likes to encourage the younger members of our profession to, as he said in the article:

Provoke us to think outside of the day-to-day duties that often absorb us. It allows us to develop an understanding of the larger context of our profession—the national policy, strategic cultures, military strategy, and societal issues—which impact on the training for, and conduct of, military operations and wider national security affairs. Reading also provides the practitioner with an excellent opportunity for vicarious learning, through studying the ‘breadth and depth’ of the history of our profession.

I quoted him at length because I have often said something similar in the effort to engender the spark that causes people to pursue lifelong personal professional development.

Reading evokes onerous connotation these days. There is simply too much information out there, and many get caught up in other activities that—while much more entertaining—really do not enable the learning we need for our profession. Being “made” to do this is also unmotivating, but when people take it on as a personal task, it has a deeper meaning and greater internal value. In our profession, actual experience is good, though we rarely get a choice on what that experience will be or when it will happen. We also learn from our own mistakes and experiences instead of learning from others, which could make us so much better at a much less cost. There is a Chinese proverb that

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says, “Average people learn from their own mistakes, wise people learn from others’ mistakes, fools learn from neither.” Think about this the next time you convince yourself that you are too busy to read.

The words I chose for the title of this short article were purposeful. I keep track of all the books I read and rate them all 1 to 5 stars. I do this so as not to read a book twice (there are too many yet to get to) and to be able to recommend books to people on certain topics. I refer to the cumulative list as my “mind” because all of the books combined in that list had a formative influence on me as a professional and as a warrior. Everything I interpreted

from those books, whether consciously or unconsciously, is stored in my brain housing group. As LtGen Paul K. Van Riper, USMC(Ret) once wrote:

All innovations are based on the creative use of information. The widely-read officer faced with a new situation can search his ‘stored knowledge’ to find the concepts or facts and figures he needs to develop a solution. The less widely-read officer will more likely have to resort to a trial and error approach.

Malcolm Gladwell discusses this in his book, *Blink*, where intuition—as formed by years of accumulated knowledge and experience, both actual and vicarious—engenders the wisdom that allows experts to make decisions in what seems like a split second. I am not claiming that I can fully do what he describes, but the “5,000-year-old mind” I have always sought to develop and enhance has helped me many times over the course of my career as it has for many



**What he has read may influence the decision he makes. (Photo by Cpl Brendan Custer.)**

others. During the march up for OIF, then-MajGen James N. Mattis referenced it when he was asked by a reporter about a very difficult decision he made in what seemed to be a very short time frame. The reporter marveled that it took him only 30 seconds to make the decision, but Gen Mattis corrected him by saying, “No, it took me 30 years to make that decision.”

Like MAJGEN Ryan, I am a believer in casting a wide net when trying to understand all aspects of my profession. I am also keenly aware that the Marine Corps is a “people business” because we

may just have to make-do or sacrifice for lack of any other alternative. I read for many reasons, but the one that drives me to do so the hardest is so that I can continually push off the time when I will be faced with a challenge that I have no earthly idea what to do about it. I feel I am in a race against time and each book or article I read pushes that time off just a little bit more.

Given what I have said, I developed my own list of recommended books that are pertinent to our profession and were incredibly interesting and valuable to me. There is no intent for it to com-

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have to find ways to motivate people to do things they would not naturally do on their own volition. The better we understand people in general, the better we can be at applying art rather than science. Tactical or doctrinal proficiency (science) means that we know what the general guidelines are for a given situation and follow them, at least in general. True expertise, or art, comes when we know when it is time to deviate from those guidelines for a good reason. Gen Robert E. Lee demonstrated this “art” in the Chancellorsville Campaign during our Civil War. He recognized the situation he was faced with and violated several cardinal principles of war to decisively defeat a numerically and materially superior enemy. He did this because he thoroughly understood the general opposing him and used that knowledge to best effect.

The imperative to focus on understanding the art of war, as opposed to the science of war, is growing stronger every day. As the operating environment we face continues to change at what often seems like breakneck pace, the challenges will become increasingly complex. Many of these challenges are what is referred to as “wicked problems” in that they do not have a solution. We

pete with our Commandant’s Reading List which is reviewed often with CMC’s personal involvement, and it is by no means comprehensive. It is only designed to whet people’s appetites and inculcate in all a burning desire to know more—because none of us will ever be smart enough. For those interested, here are my recommendations.

**For the Novice (to “hook” their interest in reading):**

- *Rifleman Dodd* by C.S. Forester.
- *Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card.
- *Gates of Fire* by Stephen Pressfield.
- *Battle Cry* by Leon Uris.
- *Fields of Fire* by James Webb.

**For a Better Understanding of our Country:**

- *To America* by Stephen Ambrose.
- *Flags of our Fathers* by James Bradley.
- *My Losing Season* by Pat Conroy.
- *Why Courage Matters* by Sen John McCain.
- *Angel in the Whirlwind* by Benson Bobrick.

**For a Better Understanding of Human Nature:**

- *The Road to Character* by David Brooks.

- *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.
- *The Churchill Factor* by Boris Johnson.
- *Natural Born Heroes* by Christopher McDougall.
- *Man’s Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl.

**For a Better Understanding of the Necessity for Military Professionalism:**

- *The Warrior Ethos* by Stephen Pressfield.
- *This Kind of War* by T.R. Fehrenbach.
- *Strange Defeat* by Marc Bloch.
- *Fighting for the Future* by Ralph Peters.
- *The Blitzkrieg Legend* by Karl Heinz Frieser.

**For a Better Understanding of the Warrior Mindset:**

- *Courage Under Fire* by VADM (Ret) James Stockdale.
- *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand.
- *The Nature of Alexander* by Mary Renault.
- *The Obstacle is the Way* by Ryan Holiday.
- *Grit* by Angela Duckworth.

**For a Better Understanding of Current and Possibly Future Challenges:**

- *LikeWar* by Singer and Brooking.
- *Deep Thinking* by Garry Kasparov.
- *Wired for War* by Peter Singer.
- *The Unquiet Frontier* by Grygiel and Mitchell.
- *The China Mirage* by James Bradley.

If you would like a glimpse into my mind, my list of books I have read is an Excel document. Send me an email and I will send you the file. I update it every six months and the only caveat I offer is that the 1 to 5 star ratings are only my opinion. Clearly, others may differ.

Happy reading!

