

# Commandant's Professional Reading List

A call

by Capt Olivia Garard

Just as there is risk to the Marine Corps' modernization, there is more risk inherent in failing to adapt. If the Marine Corps shifts its posture and design without also shifting its minds, then a critical conceptual vulnerability remains. New equipment and headquarters are required, but if they are not connected to the appropriate mental models and frameworks, their value will be limited at best. Given that none of the current eight "Commandant's Choice" books for all Marines focuses on naval integration, the probability of this occurring is too great to leave to chance. The Marine Corps must modernize its institutional mind by revising the Commandant's Professional Reading List.

Professional reading lists circumscribe an "organization's intellectual priorities and canonical foundation." These lists, as I've written before, "display [organizational] values." Since 1989, when then-Commandant Gen Alfred M. Gray issued the order, the Marine Corps has had a Professional Reading List. The list has evolved over the years and was last published and updated by former Commandant Gen Robert B. Neller in March 2019.

The *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, published in July 2019 by Commandant Gen David H. Berger, is a profound reorientation for the Marine Corps. It sets the Marine Corps on a path toward executing the responsibilities set forth in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*. Gen Berger's "Notes on Designing the Marine Corps of the

***By reading, you learn through others' experiences, generally a better way to do business, especially in our line of work where the consequences of incompetence are so final for young men [and women].***

**—Secretary James N. Mattis**

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Future" further underscores the imperative, scale, and degree of the change required. A reading list in support of the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* will help its implementation.

This article provides recommendation to modernize the Commandant's Professional Reading List. First, it establishes a set of ten books narrowly focused on the demands of the guidance. Marines, like before, are required to read a minimum of five. Second, it separates out two categories, the main effort, which is the set of ten works, and the supporting effort, a collection of subsets of works for further exploration divided by interest (e.g., strategy, history, technology, leadership, and by region). Crucially, the list is no longer segregated by rank. Given that warfare's future is no longer about the general—it is about the sergeant and the lieutenant—

it is imperative that all Marines have a conceptual understanding that moves seamlessly between the tactical and the strategic. Additionally, narrowing the focus to a key ten works means that the likelihood that a colonel and corporal have recently read the same book is greater. This fosters more of a book club mentality that can easily fit into a training and exercise schedule.

It should also be noted that *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, is no longer included on the list. Our doctrine must saturate how we plan, think, and act. It is an implied task to continuously refactor our thinking through a *warfighting* lens. It is an expectation to read and re-read *Warfighting*. It need not be called-out. Most importantly, the intellectual main effort establishes the "canonical foundation" necessary for the force demanded by the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. In fact, such a conceptual reorganization will enable Marines "to challenge the status quo and continue to ask the hard questions—regardless of the discomfort they produce."

These are the ten recommended books for the main effort:



**There are some other books to consider for CMC professional reading. (Photo by LCpl Rebecca Eller.)**

*Small Boats and Daring Men: Maritime Raiding, Irregular Warfare, and the Early American Navy* by Benjamin Armstrong. If there were only one book to recommend, this is it. Armstrong's book argues persuasively for a third type of naval warfare, *guerre de razzia*, to add to the conventional duality between *guerre d'escadre* and *guerre de course*. Charting the development of the early American Navy, Armstrong also unearths understudied Marine Corps history. Future amphibious operations will likely look more like the naval operations found in Armstrong's book than the large-scale amphibious operations of World War II and War Plan Orange. The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* requires the naval integration, mission command, and persistent forward presence found in *Small Boats and Daring Men*, but with the addition of missiles, unmanned technologies, and ubiquitous sensing. This is the Marine legacy with which to frame future operations.

By *More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* by Michael Green. While Armstrong's book provides the foundation for past naval integration and a new way of thinking about operations. Green's book provides the historic details on why we, the Navy-Marine Corps Team, were ordered to focus

on the IndoPacific in the first place. Explaining *why* is essential to ensure subordinates carry out a commander's intent. This common understanding describes the historical reasoning behind the priority demanded by the *National Defense Strategy* and the Commandant's recent guidance in support of staffing the force. Green's book helps to underscore why this is the Marine Corps' main effort, setting the mental conditions required to implement the 21st century version of *guerre de razzia*.

*Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations, Third Edition* by CAPT Wayne P. Hughes Jr., USN(Ret) and RADM Robert P. Girrier, USN(Ret). To integrate with the Navy, the Marine Corps must understand how the Navy fights as a fleet. There is no better option than *Fleet Tactics*. From the six cornerstones—*sailors matter most; doctrine is the glue of good tactics; to know tactics, you must know weapons; the seat of purpose is on the land; "A ship's a fool to fight a fort"; and attack effectively first*—to salvo equations, Hughes and Girrier comprehensively describe the tactical tenets on which naval operations are based. If the Marine Corps is to serve as the supporting component, then the Marine Corps must understand how the navy fights to best support naval operations. Moreover, the third edition

accounts for trends in technology and the information environment, including cyber and the electromagnetic spectrum, all of which are crucial in future fights.

On *Tactics: A Theory of Victory in Battle* by B.A. Friedman. This book should be shoved into a cargo pocket and taken to the field. It comprehensively looks across the various principles of war put forth by theorists and questions that ones hold. The Marine Corps excels at tactics, yet it is imperative to have a theoretical underpinning of those tactics to challenge choices, decisions, techniques, and procedures. Importantly, Friedman's work contextualizes tactics within strategy, helping to clarify how tactical actions have strategic effects or, in other words, how the corporal becomes strategic.

*A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare* by Ian T. Brown. Brown's book explores the birth and development of the Marine Corps' maneuver warfare philosophy. This replaces *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U. S. Marine Corps*, focusing on different periods of Marine Corps intellectual history. Brown explains the legacy and prevalence of John Boyd's thought, particularly his observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) loop, within the Marine Corps. Boyd's work provided the theoretical grounding for the development of maneuver warfare, the current Marine Corps doctrine. Most importantly, this serves to reinvigorate maneuver warfare and fan intellectual curiosity in the future force.

*The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, translated by Michael Nylan. Both Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* are no longer on the Commandant's Reading List. Of the two, Sun Tzu should be returned to the list. Nylan's translation is masterful. She clearly captures nuance that can be lost in the aphoristic-like work. For example, "Thus the troops who win care more about victory, and less about doing battle, and the troops liable to defeat care most about going into battle and less about seeking victory." This captures the tension between competition and conflict and the conceptual reorientation demanded by the *National*

*Defense Strategy*. What shines in this edition, too, is the clarity of the effect of terrain, climate, weather, and humans on action. Like all classics, it begs for re-reading and is short enough to engender that.

*Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life* by James Kerr. Leadership can be taught; this is a core tenet of the Marine Corps. But it requires careful scrutiny and continuous practice. The All Blacks, the winningest rugby team, serves as such an example. Kerr utilizes clearly modeled examples. Particularly insightful is the shifting balance between coaches and players over the course of the week. Coaches be-

evance and reference in *Ender's Game*.

*Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein. Another work of science fiction, Heinlein's classic is an exploration of dedication, duty, and combat leadership. It follows a mobile infantry trooper through his recruitment, basic training, service, commissioning and officer training, and finally his ascension to command. *Starship Troopers* offers an accessible way to examine professional military service. As the titular troopers fight in an extremely disaggregated fashion, sometimes hundreds of miles apart from each other, the tactics portrayed have new relevance for distributed operations and mission command.

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gin each week strongly determining the conduct of practice. This slowly shifts to a player's led game by the end of the week. This transformation of command and ownership over intent is necessary for disaggregated formations operating under mission command, especially as we continue to put more burden on small ad hoc teams.

*Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card. Fiction is essential and *Ender's Game* is a classic. A story of friendship, leadership, betrayal, and tactics, *Ender's Game* is a cultural reference point and a way to demonstrate the power of science fiction to stretch our imaginations about how we could fight in the future. Each year, we get closer and closer to training and fighting like Ender Wiggins. For instance, we have virtual reality and augmented reality to help train more frequently with less resources. Live, virtual, and constructive networks allow integration in training exercises of disparate elements, both real and synthetic. And, of course, commanding and controlling machines, operating at various levels of autonomy, is a new required skill set. All of which find rel-

*The White Donkey: Terminal Lance* by Maximilian Uriarte. There are many reasons this work should be included on the main effort. First, buy-in. It has likely already been read by many enlisted personnel and officers and would serve as a near immediate work of common access. Second, it is a graphic novel. Having a non-book book on the main effort demonstrates the commitment to the larger goal of the collection, fostering a collective dialogue around works that speak to the Marine Corps' necessary trajectory regardless from which media they emerge. Third, it provides an opportunity for leaders, at all levels, to discuss post-traumatic stress and returning from war—as necessary for individual Marines as it is for an institution that has been tasked by the *National Defense Strategy* to redeploy and move beyond the legacy of the last twenty years.

The main effort is also weighted toward recent works and in support of implementing the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. This is intentional. It is meant to establish professional habits of engaging in and keeping up with cur-

rent professional debates. The focus is on national strategy, naval strategy within the national strategy, the logic behind why the strategies are what they are, and then the operations and tactics that the integrated naval force should be prepared to execute in support of both. These are the ten best works that capture that sentiment. Secondly, every main effort needs a supporting effort. The Commandant's main effort reading list should be supported by the Commandant's expanded reading guide where Marines, who are interested in further reading, can easily find recommendations. This would also be a tool for leaders to tailor professional reading to the needs of their mission, unit, and situation.

The supporting effort would be a compendium of works, organized by category vice rank, where Marines can find further sources of education based on their reading of the main effort. The list, presented in more of a menu-based form, could be easily integrated into the Marinesmobile smart phone app with links to the sources themselves or points of purchase. Categories could include: strategy, technology, Indo-Pacific region, leadership, military history, Marine Corps history, fiction, and memoirs. Nor should it be limited to books; links to professional journals, websites, audiobooks, and podcasts would enhance the richness of the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program.

Whereas the main effort would be updated annually or biennially, options within the supporting effort could be continuously refreshed. This would enable works, like *Small Boats and Daring Men*, to spread faster throughout the Corps. It would also foster interoperability between recommended podcasts, websites, audiobooks, videos, and professional journals. Our intellectual collaboration should mimic how we expect to fight: distributed and under mission command. This framework provides a place to start.

>Author's Note: Quoted text is taken primarily from the 38th Commandant's Planning Guidance published in July 2019 and the National Defense Strategy published in 2018.

