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Ever since my developmental switch “flipped” a few years ago and the pursuit of knowledge became a critical aspect of my professional identity as a U.S. Army officer, I’ve devoured the books on the various reading lists I’ve come across. Unfortunately, I didn’t realize I was doing myself a disservice. My reading was akin to an unbalanced diet too rich in protein. I was consuming a lot of nonfiction, while fiction was absent from my plate – a very valuable source of professional growth.

I believe that my unbalanced approach to self-development is reflective of a larger institutional bias toward non-fiction, which typically includes biographies, military history or leadership books. With the exception of the Marine Corps, you will find only two books in the fiction column on the remaining Service Chiefs’ reading lists: [A Message to Garcia](#) and [Once an Eagle](#). The absence of this genre could be the result of an organizational barrier that views fiction as entertainment. If folks are taking the time to read, a common sentiment is that it should be spent on the standard nonfiction canon that exists on almost every reading list.

During a decade of service, I had only read two fiction books for development: [Gates of Fire](#) and [Once an Eagle](#). Things changed late last year, when Colonel (ret) [Jim Greer](#), a

mentor, recommended that I start reading fiction for professional growth. He wrote, "You'll find as you go forward that the problems you confront and the things you are asked to do require an education and understanding that is more broad than deep."

He's not the only one who has adopted this outlook on fiction's importance in professional development. As General Martin Dempsey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, writes in his forward to *War Stories from the Future*, a science-fiction anthology published by the [Atlantic Council's Art of Future Warfare project](#):

By provoking us to free our minds of constraint and convention, worthy science fiction allows us to create a mental laboratory of sorts. In this place, we can consider new problems we might soon face or contemplate novel ways to address old problems. It sparks the imagination, engenders flexible thinking, and invites us to explore challenges and opportunities we might otherwise overlook.

Admiral (ret) Jim Stavridis, another senior leader worth emulating, [said](#) that reading fiction helped him throughout his career to better understand the human condition. In fact, his literary intake is 80% fiction and 20% nonfiction. His June 2015 [article](#) in Foreign Policy argues that we can learn more about Putin's mindset from Russian fiction more so than intel reports or other non-fiction sources. It was his presentation at the Naval War College that introduced me to [Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War](#) and [The Circle](#), two of the best books I've read this year.

Picking up a piece of classic literature, historical fiction, or science fiction is an exciting way to introduce ourselves to new and abstract concepts. My friend [Diane Maye](#) even [suggests](#) that reading fiction can help us better understand decision-making from multiple perspectives in chaotic situations. Reading George R.R. Martin's [Game of Thrones](#) may help [generate a different perspective](#) on geopolitics in Europe or the Middle East. Robert Heinlein's [Starship Troopers](#) might shape our thoughts on national service.

James Webb's [Fields of Fire](#) can teach us about small-unit leadership. And John Hershey's [A Bell for Adano](#) gives us insight into the problems of soldiers taking on governance in post-conflict operations.

Reading fiction helps us better retain what we learn. A good story causes our brains to produce imagery and emotion that aide in the "stickiness" of the lessons. In their book, [Made to Stick](#), the Heath Brothers, argue that stories are like flight simulators for the brain. When we read stories, are minds simulate the events that unfold on the pages of the book. We empathize with the characters; we feel anger, sadness, and joy-emotions, which attach themselves to the lessons we glean, helping us to recall them later. I can still vividly remember one of the key battles in Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire*, and the speech Leonidas gave to his Spartans when the dust settled. It was an emotional scene and the lessons I pulled from it remain with me a decade later. His words shaped how I make the transition from husband and father to Soldier and back again during deployments and homecomings.

Even if our officially published professional military reading lists continue to exclude fiction, I encourage leaders to expand their professional libraries to encompass not just books on Pericles, George Patton, or Hal Moore, but also Achilles ([Illiad](#)), Robert Jordan ([For Whom the Bell Tolls](#)), and Ivy Xiao ([Seveneves](#)).

In the end, war is a human problem and there is no better reflection of the human condition than the stories we tell.

Below is a list of fiction that should be considered for professional reading:

The Classics:

[The Iliad and the Odyssey by Homer](#)

[War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy](#)

[1984 by George Orwell](#)

[Animal Farm by George Orwell](#)

[Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane](#)

[For Whom the Bell Tolls by Ernest Hemingway](#)

[All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque](#)

[Catch-22 by Joseph Heller](#)

Modern Fiction:

[A Bell for Adano by John Hersey](#)

[Fields of Fire by James Webb](#)

[Matterhorn by Karl Marlantes \(with *What it is Like to Go to War, non-fiction*\)](#)

[Song of Ice and Fire \(series\) by George R.R. Martin](#)

[The Circle by Dave Eggers](#)

[*I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* by Jesse Goolsby](#)

[Green on Blue by Elliot Ackerman](#)

Science Fiction:

[Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card](#)

[Starship Troopers by Robert Heinlein](#)

[The Peripheral by William Gibson](#)

[Seveneves by Neal Stephenson](#)

[Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War by Singer and Cole](#)

[War Stories from the Future by the Atlantic Council Art of Future Warfare Project](#)

[The Profession by Steven Pressfield](#)

[Three-body Problem by Liu Cixin](#)

[The Player of Games by Ian M. Banks](#)

[Dune by Frank Herbert](#)

Historic Fiction:

[Killer Angels by Michael Shaara](#)

[Gates of Fire by Steven Pressfield](#)

[The Afghan Campaign by Steven Pressfield](#)

If you're interested in reading more about how fiction is a critical aspect to the Profession, I encourage you to check out [Men at War: What Fiction Tells Us About, From the Iliad to Catch-22 by Christopher Coker](#). You can also track your progress on this reading list via

Goodreads- [Click here!](#)

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