



by Marshall McGurk

Summer is a season of transition for newly commissioned officers. The new lieutenants and ensigns attend their officer basic courses and arrive at their first units of assignment. They are empowered to lead, train, and fight alongside some of the best men and women they will ever have the pleasure of knowing. Nervous with anticipation, they are eager to meet their platoon, prepare training, and perhaps deploy overseas.

Each summer graduation season also brings the advice of senior leaders in the form of reading lists. From a [hundred books](#) to [five](#), every senior leader has an opinion on what his charges should read and why. However, many reading lists are too verbose for any junior officer to take seriously. For example, the [West Point reading list](#) has 47 books on it, with

only six written by junior officers or former enlisted men.

[Band of Brothers](#) and [If You Survive](#) are good starting points but there are already enough books on reading lists written by officers — successful ones at that. As much as we may try, no one can be Major Dick Winters, and no company can replicate the camaraderie and success of Easy Company.

Books on [strategy](#) stretch the mind but do not offer advice on leading tactical formations. [Science fiction](#) and [military fiction](#) spark the imagination but they also force us to question if officers would truly act in the way portrayed. Battle histories are engaging, yet may not touch on day-to-day life at the junior leader level. General officer [biographies](#) and [autobiographies](#) do not benefit from decades removed from the junior officer years, nor do we hear from their subordinates. Therein lies the missing link.

“Okay Major McGurk, what should I read?”

To that query I answer, “Look towards the enlisted service members. They will show you the way.”

The Enlisted Always Watch...and Remember

Nowhere is the pride, love, and admiration of a good leader clearer than when it is written by the hands of an enlisted soldier. “Joe is always watching,” our professors and tactical officers said. “Joe looks to you for what to do.” Believe that advice, and read it in black and white as Marine Corporal Eugene B. Sledge describes the bond formed with his company commander [A.A. Haldane](#) in his book, [With the Old Breed: At Peleliu to Okinawa](#). Captain Haldane’s death on Peleliu left a void in the K Company 3/5 Marines. “[He had the respect of every man in the company.](#)” Haldane’s leadership style of humility, competence, and leading from the front are foundational lessons for any junior leader.

It was not only Capt. Haldane either. Sledge writes fondly of the thoughtful engagements and courageous examples set by most of the company's officers. Sledge's mortar crew teammate R.V. Burgin, who also [wrote](#) and [spoke](#) about beloved officers, paying tribute to his company executive officer [LT "Hillbilly" Jones](#), and Capt. Haldane. Their deaths highlight the loss our country suffered in blood and treasure. Capt. Haldane, LT Jones, and others exhibited loyalty, treated their subordinates with respect, and selflessly served their Marines. Each man under their command remembered their high quality. It is a tribute to LT Stanley, who led Kilo Company after Haldane's death, that he was asked to write the forward to Sledge's book.

Perhaps more telling is the radical candor reserved for the officers who belittle their men, exhibit toxic behavior, or exude needless bravado where their boasts never matched action. "Joe is always watching." Yes indeed, and Eugene Sledge remembers the good and the bad with acute clarity.

So, how do you want to be remembered?

### Everyone Makes Mistakes

The memories and stories of the enlisted soldiers themselves should be cherished. The rank and file win the nation's battles through brute force and violence. They train in crucibles on Sand Hill, Georgia or Parris Island, South Carolina. They are young, they are wild, and often they do wild things.

Perhaps Private First Class Robert Leckie, USMC would have preferred an administrative Article 15 instead of the week of bread and water punishment he received in Australia. Leckie's [Helmet For My Pillow](#) reminds us that enlisted members groused, rabble-roused, and spent plenty of time taking their non-judicial punishments. Yes, [the "Greatest Generation"](#) got into plenty of trouble. The service members of today sometimes do the same.

Leckie chronicles his experience with a keen eye, especially the rowdiness of Marine Corps life on holiday. Leckie and his teammates steal beer from a bar near Camp Lejeune. Leckie pulls a gun on a nurse during convalescence, exhausted from combat, rain, and a case of enuresis at Cape Gloucester. The Marines spend rest and relaxation time in Australia, bar brawls included. Leckie and his machine gun fought hard and played hard.

Unlike E.B. Sledge, Private Leckie pens the actions of his peers and superiors with pseudonyms. No one escapes mentions from Leckie's journalist viewpoint. We are treated to everything from the southern racist to the quiet Midwestern. We feel his disgust when officers take things for themselves, put tents up for themselves while everyone is in the muck, or accuse enlisted members of stealing. He rails against the perfumed princes who believe they are better than everyone else. He also pays due to the commanders who set the example and treat themselves no different from their men.

So, how are you going to set the example when the chips are down?

### The Horror Of War

Radical candor is the realm of the enlisted. Mind the words of Corporal Sledge and Private First Class Leckie, Lieutenants. Read them carefully and take heed: do not waste the lives of your subordinates. Leckie, Sledge, and their comrades put more than just their physical bodies at risk; they risked their sanity, their sense of humanity, and their connection to people they love. Both men write of the inhumanity of souvenir hunters plying their trade in body parts such as teeth and skulls. Sledge nearly succumbed to tooth-collecting behavior until a Navy Corpsman held him accountable. Sledge decides on a pair of Japanese army epaulets instead.

I say these things not to disparage an older generation but to impart a simple fact: war is hell.

“Time had no meaning; life had no meaning. The fierce struggle for survival in the abyss of Peleliu eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all.”

- [CPL Eugene Sledge, USMC](#)

It is unnatural for such wanton trauma and pain to be inflicted on bodies and minds of any age. The greatest generation was young and did their duty. Our global war on terrorism generation has done the same. Try as we might, human beings will never be able to normalize the emotional and spiritual trauma brought out by wanton killing. Sledge suffered nightmares about the war to the end of his days but found solace through [connecting with people and nature](#). Leckie decided to write about his war years and [become a prolific author](#). Our enlisted soldiers are at grave risk of moral injury after combat, however good leadership from junior officers can help all of us remain interconnected and heal.

So, Lieutenant, remember your humanity and your compassion for the soldiers, marines, sailors, airmen, guardsmen, and guardians you will lead. Be a moral compass and a lighthouse in the darkness so ships do not shatter upon the rocks. Your good example to your servicemembers will help all of us process the trauma of war, and the trauma of attempting to hold the peace. Maintain contact, stay connected, and be the lieutenant the soldiers are glad to see years later. Remember, Joe is always watching...and a couple of them may write about you someday.

Oh, and one last thing that the enlisted do not forget: Lieutenants and maps do not agree.

“From night problems we learned one lasting lesson: when a map and a compass come into contact with a second lieutenant, prepare yourself for confusion” - [PFC Robert Leckie, USMC](#).

Happy Leading, Happy Reading.

Referenced Readings:

[With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa](#) by [Eugene B. Sledge](#)

[Island of the Damned: A Marine At War In The Pacific](#) by R.V. Burgin

[Helmet for My Pillow](#) by Robert Leckie

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