



by Amy Padilla

My [father is a retired](#) Marine Corps Major General and a combat veteran who gave over 37 years of his life to the service. He is now living his best life in Woodland Park, CO, enjoying retirement and lots of time with family. A big part of his retirement has been reading. He has read and reread books like [Tim](#) O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, [Karl](#) Marlantes' *What It Is Like To Go To War* and *Matterhorn*, and [Eugene](#) Sledge's *With the Old Breed*, to name a few.

As a literature student, I joined him. We give each other recommendations and talk through our thoughts, kind of like a book club.

One book that I have been trying to get him to read for years is [Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*](#) (1969), which I first read as a senior in high school. My dad was also assigned this book in high school but he didn't read it. He had no idea what it was about.

As it turns out, a surprising amount of people haven't read this book. When I polled about a dozen of my family members, only one person had read it: my sister-in-law who has a literary background, like me. In case you are in the same boat as many others, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is a well-known novel that centers around Billy Pilgrim, an optometrist and World War II veteran. Famously, Billy is "unstuck in time" (Vonnegut 25) and abducted by aliens, but this is only one of the weirdest parts of this book. The firebombing of Dresden is one of the most important parts of the novel, an event that Vonnegut himself witnessed as a young man.

Slaughterhouse-Five was first published in 1969, during the Vietnam War. The novel is sometimes classified as anti-war literature, science fiction, black humor, or satire. But this genre-bending novel defies categorization.

Long story short, I love this book. It has helped me through some tough times, as many books have. I haven't gone to war, but I am a huge book nerd and I use novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* to get through training exercises and long periods of isolation. A few months ago, I told my dad about a paper I was writing about *Slaughterhouse-Five* and I got the full story about how he never read it. In fact, his only exposure to Kurt Vonnegut was his cameo appearance in the film [Back to School](#) (1986). I gave him my old copy to read, and sure enough, he read it. I was anxious to hear his feedback.

Would he appreciate this unconventional little book? What would he think about the depictions of war, having gone to war himself?

I decided to record our conversation, as it was sure to be enlightening, at least.

Here is our conversation:

AP: Have you ever read the book? If so, what were the circumstances?

FP: No, but I was supposed to. I was assigned this book in high school and I did what I usually did, I read the CliffNotes version and wrote the paper anyway. That was over 40 years ago, so I don't remember what I learned, if anything. I never read it during adulthood

because it was never on the Commandant's reading list.

AP: What was your overall response to the book?

FP: Kurt Vonnegut is an odd duck. His writing is not that sophisticated, sort of commonplace at best — it's what he says that's interesting. It surprises me that he (having gone through what he went through) handled it so well. Writing is often medicine, that's what happened with Sledge, Leckey, Marlantes, etc., and Vonnegut seems in the same boat. Vonnegut mixes his own experiences with fiction, which seems to distance himself a bit from the traumatic experiences.

Regarding the form of the book, I really had to pay attention. The narration style is very odd. The language is simple and easy to understand, but it's the content that's difficult. The narration sporadically jumps in and out of time and place, it keeps you on your toes. I found myself constantly flipping back a few pages to double-check that I read things right. I couldn't breeze through this book, and I think that is a good thing. If you are someone who likes to parse out the tiniest details, this book is for you.

AP: What are some of your experiences with combat? How did this affect your reading of the book?

FP: I have plenty of experience in combat (multiple tours in Iraq and Somalia) and I carry these experiences with me in everything that I do. They are always with me. My experiences helped me to read the book through a lens informed by my own personal struggles to come to terms with what I have seen, done, and lost. I can see how writing this book could have been therapy for Kurt Vonnegut, a way of finally getting these experiences out.

War is complicated, and I have really bad, terrible memories as well as some funny ones. My wife Cindy sent me hundreds and hundreds of packets of Texas Pete (my favorite hot sauce) when I was in Iraq, which I remember fondly. I remember smelling awful in the desert after not showering for months on end and welcoming the smell of my Sergeant Major's nasty cigars, which covered up my own BO. One of the funniest stories from Iraq was when my unit was ordered to grow mustaches — some uniforms had gone missing and we were worried that the Fedayeen would try to disguise themselves as Marines and infiltrate. To distinguish ourselves, leadership decided we would all grow mustaches. As a battalion commander, I had two major concerns. First of all, most of my men were barely old enough to have facial hair. They couldn't grow a mustache if they had two years. And second, with my dark Mexican features plus the tan I had from the desert, I looked more like a member of the Fedayeen than a Marine. I could have been Saddam's brother or cousin. I raised these

concerns to my direct superior (who would one day become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff). He said to me, "Fred, I always try my best to be transparent to tell you the 'why' behind each decision. Not this time — just grow the damn mustache." And so I did.

Combat itself is more difficult to talk about, but going to war is an interesting experience. Some of my best stories come from my time deployed in Iraq and Somalia, but I would not wish for anyone to go through what I went through.

AP: How is this book different from other books about war?

FP: It's advertised as an "anti-war" novel, but it is different. Its unique premise does not explicitly condemn war, it just says "this is how it is" — bad things just happen. It doesn't beat you over the head with anti-war rhetoric or a call to action. This book also left me with questions: what else Kurt did Vonnegut see? How did he handle it? He skirts around his own lived experience of the war, using Billy Pilgrim as a stand-in. Maybe it's just because I have been to war, but I want to know more details.

AP: Who do you think should read this novel and why?

FP: I don't think that everyone needs to or should read this novel. There is a good reason why it isn't on the Commandant's reading list. If someone is currently struggling to come to terms with their combat experiences, this book could potentially cause more harm than good. The main character, Billy Pilgrim, uses escapism as a coping mechanism. He becomes detached from reality, which is an unhealthy way of dealing with trauma. We do not want to endorse harmful coping mechanisms like the ones portrayed in this book.

I do, however, think that this book is good for those who either haven't experienced war or who have already come to terms with their experiences. This book can help leaders learn how to care for troops under their command who may be struggling with mental health. It can help in understanding where combat survivors come from. This book is perfect for someone like you [Amy], who is simultaneously in the academic sphere and a military leader early in her career. You are in a unique position that allows you to think critically about this book and understand how it can be useful or harmful in leadership.

When in combat or other high-stress environments, you have to separate feelings from action. This type of compartmentalization can sometimes be helpful but can be extremely harmful when taken to the extreme. The feelings that you push aside will eventually

resurface, whether you like it or not, and this book highlights how you have to deal with your problems.

I also think that this book is good for learning about WWII history and understanding the difference between war then and now. Many more people died in WWII than in any other war that we can remember in our lifetimes. The bombing of Dresden was apocalyptic. We don't see conflicts on that scale anymore. Ukraine is an anomaly and another conversation entirely, but for the most part, the kind of carnage we saw in WWII doesn't exist anymore. This book also underscores the difference between the European and the Pacific campaigns. In the Pacific, if you were taken prisoner you were abused horribly, so almost no one surrendered. Vonnegut's treatment as a POW in Germany was no picnic, but it is interesting to compare his experiences to POWs in the Pacific theatre, such as Louis Zamperini ([Unbroken](#)).

AP: What other recommendations do you have for military leaders or those simply wanting to learn more about these issues?

FP: I always start with the [Commandant's reading list](#) when looking for my next read. As for the best war novels that I've read, I suggest books by Karl Marlantes such as [What It Is Like to Go to War](#) and [Matterhorn](#). I also recommend Eugene Sledge's [With the Old Breed](#) and the miniseries [The Pacific](#), partially inspired by Sledge's book. Tim O'Brien's [The Things They Carried](#) is another classic, and its narration by Bryan Cranston on Audible is amazing.

*There are lots of movies and shows about war, and while I love shows like [M*A*S*H](#) (1972-1983) and movies like [Stalag 17](#) (1953) it's important to take these depictions with a grain of salt. I'll never forget my grandfather, a WWI vet who survived trench warfare, watching Hogan's Heroes with us when I was a kid. I remember him saying, under his breath and in Spanish, "stupidest show I've ever seen... that's not what war is like." I realize now that he was right — that isn't what war is like. Sometimes war is absurd because of the funny things that happen, like growing bad mustaches and having comical amounts of hot sauce mailed to you. But mostly, war is absurd because of the destruction and wastefulness of it all. It's hard to encapsulate, but we try.*

Amy Padilla is a recent graduate of the United States Air Force Academy and a Second Lieutenant in the United States Space Force. She is currently working towards a MA in English Literature at Colorado State University.

Frederick Padilla (Maj Gen USMC Ret.) resides in Woodland Park, CO, and stays active in the USMC community. He enjoys hiking and spending time with his six children and four grandchildren. His Wikipedia page can be found [here](#).

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