What It Is Like to Go to War Study Guide

What It Is Like to Go to War by Karl Marlantes

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"What It Is Like To Go To War" is Karl Marlantes' extended proposition on how we as a society should approach war and how our warriors should be prepared for what we ask them to do. Marlantes was a young reserve officer in the Marine Corps studying on a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University when he entered into active service and was sent to Vietnam. While he was there, Marlantes was an active combat officer commanding fighters in the thick jungle. He witnessed death almost daily and was himself wounded by a grenade, receiving several medals for his actions including the Navy Cross, one of the highest combat awards.

After Vietnam, Marlantes continued his studies at Oxford and went into military intelligence in Washington D.C. He experienced the animosity of many Americans who had opposed the Vietnam war and avoided him or confronted him for his role in the fighting. He struggled with haunting visions and nightmares as well as anger and sought help in the form of therapy. Marlantes writes openly and freely about his experiences and does not shy away from recognizing his own responsibilities.

Based on his own experiences, Marlantes formulates a proposal to better prepare the young soldiers that society expects to go to war. They should be prepared psychologically and emotionally for the real possibility that they will be killing people. They should be expected to treat the enemy with humanity and to use violence ethically. They should be encouraged to recognize that combat can be thrilling and even enjoyable and given the tools to cope with any feelings of shame they have. Marlantes himself admits to enjoying the thrill of combat and reflects on the sadness he now feels in retrospect. The military should also provide veterans with a period of time to "detoxify" after leaving combat and before returning to the more normal civilian world.

Society should recognize its own role in war and in preparing and welcoming back warriors, Marlantes argues. He calls for leaders to adopt a "warrior's dictum" not to use violence except in response to violence and to realize that as leaders with the power to mobilize troops they are warriors themselves. Societies should choose sides carefully and then commit to acting aggressively to end the warfare as quickly as possible. Society should also recognize the conditions that soldiers endure during warfare and find ways to reintegrate them afterwards without causing them to feel ashamed. Finally, Marlantes uses the metaphor of Mars, the Roman god of war, to urge a reconnection of the concepts of war and justice, which were present in the earliest forms of god.

Temple of Mars

Temple of Mars Summary and Analysis

In the opening chapter, Marlantes introduces a concept he calls the "Temple of Mars" that describes a spiritual state of being when a person is in combat. He opens the chapter describing a scene in Vietnam in February 1969 when he was holed up in the jungle with a man in his unit who had been shot through the chest. Zoomer, the wounded man, was alive and breathing heavily with one good lung. Marlantes listened to the labored breathing and whispered stories to Zoomer through the night, hoping to have him evacuated the following day.

The incident reminded Marlantes of one of his first experiences with death as a boy working on his grandfather's fishing boat on the Columbia River in Oregon, where he sometimes watched the salmon that lie in the bottom of the boat seeming to gasp as they die.

As a young Marine, Marlantes explains, he had been well prepared to kill but not prepared to deal with killing and the psychological toll it can take. Being in combat is similar to a religious experience, Marlantes argues. He defines four aspects of religious experiences that are also present in combat: constant awareness of one's own mortality, complete focus on the present, valuing others' lives over your own, and being a part of a larger spiritual community. Entering into combat is like entering into the temple of Mars and fighters expected to enter into such a situation should be spiritually prepared for it.

Marlantes describes his experience in Marine boot camp, where he was initiated. He was once punished by his drill sergeant for slapping at a mosquito while training. His punishment was to stand in a mosquito-infested swamp area clothed only in his undershorts for several hours until he was covered in bites. The experience was like a rite that accepted him into the group. It also taught him to focus on even the smallest thing, such as slapping at a bug bite, that might in a combat situation be the difference between life and death.

Another incident cemented Marlantes initiation into the group when he and some friends were punished together for getting into a fight while on liberty. While his training did a good job of teaching him to rely on his comrades and think of his wider responsibility to them. It did nothing to provide him with a spiritual framework from which to view death, both the death of those he killed and the death of his fellow soldiers who were killed, some because of decisions he would be expected to make as a commander.

This lack of spiritual preparedness has become worse, Marlantes argues, since modern weapons have removed combatants from the battlefield and eliminated the physical reaction to death. Missiles can be fired from boats far off shore or from control centers anywhere in the world. By removing the causal connection between one's action and

the deaths it causes, modern fighters face potentially even bigger challenges coping with their own actions unless they are well prepared.

Killing

Killing Summary and Analysis

Marlantes opens Chapter 2 explaining that is often asked what it was like to kill someone. Or, alternatively, sometimes people would come to him and say that they imagine it must have felt awful to kill someone.

The answer to the question is not easy, he explains. Most of the time when he was killing in combat, he felt either nothing or a kind of exhilaration. This was not the answer most people wanted to hear, he acknowledges, and he hesitated giving it when he returned from Vietnam afraid he would appear to be indifferent or overzealous, as some protestors of the war portrayed those who fought in it.

Looking back after several years, Marlantes writes that he mostly feels sadness over the killing he has done. He relates a story where he was on a hillside in Vietnam with one other Marine named Ohio. The two of them were crawling up the hill toward an enemy position when a grenade came flying overhead. They responded with a grenade of their own, thrown up the hill toward where they thought the first had grenade had come from. This exchange went on three more times, with the Marines moving closer to the enemy each time. Marlantes split away from Ohio and came around to the side of the hole where the North Vietnamese fighters were entrenched. One of them was dead, he saw, and the other preparing to throw another grenade. He aimed his rifle and waited for the fighter to pop up from the hole. When he did, Marlantes fired his rifle, jerking the gun by mistake and hitting the man low in his body. He fired three more shots wildly and saw Ohio run up, firing his machine gun at the man.

Marlantes' first reaction was joy that he had survived. He was excite to watch Ohio come running with his gun blazing. Immediately he felt relief that no more grenades would be thrown and then at once turned his attention to the next objective. He did not think about the incident again for years.

Later, however, the image of the teenaged Vietnamese soldier haunted Marlantes. He imagined the young man as one of his own sons, trapped in a situation where he was likely to die, and felt strong sadness.

The difference in the way Marlantes felt then and now, he explains, is because he has had time to consider and empathize. Had he taken the time to empathize while in combat, however, he says he would not have been able to go through with killing the young man. He would also have been killed himself, along with Ohio.

Marlantes gives other examples of killing where the situation is not as stark, such as when he was observing a battle from the air and was responsible for directing artillery fire and calling in air strikes. He could see a group of Vietnamese approaching a Marine encampment and called for a napalm strike. Napalm is gelled gasoline and creates a

rapidly burning fire and painful death. Marlantes was thrilled by the sight of the burned bodies after the strike, and he admits he can still summon that thrill when he thinks about the episode. Looking back, he writes, he would still have called in the attack to save the Marines but would have perhaps only used bombs, which killed quickly. He would have respected his enemy more.

Killing should be undertaken with the proper amount of respect and sadness, Marlantes argues, as if it something that must be done, but done without pleasure. Young soldiers should be taught this attitude toward killing, he believes, and given proper preparation for dealing with the grief that it causes.

Guilt

Guilt Summary and Analysis

Killing produces guilt, Marlantes explains, and soldiers should be prepared to cope with it. He addresses this issue in Chapter 3. He returns to the incident with the teenaged Vietnamese soldier described in the previous chapter. He had nearly forgotten about the incident until he went into an "encounter group" after the war and was asked to imagine explaining the episode to the family of the boy he had killed. Marlantes broke down sobbing as a flood of emotions returned. While the encounter group had caused the guilt to return, however, it had done nothing to help him cope with it.

The guilty feeling returned repeatedly to Marlantes, and he sometimes broke down into uncontrollable crying. This made work difficult and affected his family relationships. It went on for months until he happened to meet Joseph Campbell, a writer and mythologist, with whom he had a long discussion about his feelings of guilt. Campbell asked Marlantes if he thought he was fighting for good and doing the right thing at the time. Marlantes answered that he did and Campbell waved off his guilt. There are opposites in the world, Campbell explained, and Marlantes chose a side. As long as he made his decision with a "noble heart" believing he was doing the right thing, Cambell believed, he should not feel guilty.

The world is a place made up of opposites and we must sometimes choose which side to be on. Marlantes illustrates this with a story from the Indian epic the Mahabharata, in which the warrior Arjuna looks out over a battle but cannot join it because he sees some of his relatives on the opposite side. The war god Krishna tries to convince him to fight by appealing to his reason, but Arjuna refuses. He is not afraid, but his compassion prevents him from fighting. Finally Krishna convinces him by telling him, "It is not right to stand by and watch an injustice being done. There are times when active interference is needed" (p. 53).

Young soldiers are not taught this, but they should be, Marlantes argues. Furthermore, they should learn that it is not possible to always choose the right side, and to recognize that each side feels his is the right side. By preparing soldiers with the mindset that they are serving a greater purpose which they have chosen to serve, they can be better prepared to deal with the guilt that comes with killing, Marlantes feels.

Numbness and Violence

Numbness and Violence Summary and Analysis

One of the least acknowledged aspects of war, Marlantes explains in Chapter 4, is how exhilarating it is. Being in charge of a group of 40 men in Vietnam, all of whom were armed and ready to do whatever he told them to do, was a very powerful feeling. Added to this was his capability to call in air and artillery strikes from far away to bring enormous destructive power.

Marlantes struggled with this after leaving combat. He thought of himself as a good and moral person but was troubled that he found the violence of war so enjoyable. He traces his feelings to the concept that there is a natural human desire for destruction just as there is a desire for creation. Recognizing this tendency within oneself is crucial for a fighter, Marlantes argues. Those who do not acknowledge their desire to destroy cannot use that knowledge to use force wisely. They become numb to the violence they commit.

Marlantes give an example from his experience in Vietnam. He was a new commander on patrol with an experienced group. They came across a group of elephants in the jungle and one of his men told him that they often targeted elephants because the North Vietnamese Army sometimes used them to transport weapons. Not wanting to appear soft or inexperienced, Marlantes allowed his men to call in an artillery strike on the herd. Once he heard the trumpeting and crashing of the injured animals, however, he stopped the firing. His trivial desire not to appear weak to his men had temporarily "short-circuited" his compassion for the innocent animals.

Killing should not be separated from compassion, Marlantes argues. He describes another episode where he discovered some of the men under his command had cut the ears off the Vietnamese soldiers they had killed and were wearing them on their helmets. He punished them by making them dig graves for the men they had killed. While digging, two of the men began to cry.

There is a place for ritual in war according to Marlantes. He refers to the ancient story of the Iliad which describes combatants engaged in many types of rituals. Rituals as simple as caring for the bodies of the slain enemies by properly burying them can reconnect the act of killing with compassion. He answers the objection that this might undermine the commitment of the troops by suggesting that if the cause is good, it would actually strengthen them.

The Enemy Within

The Enemy Within Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 5, Marlantes writes about the shadowy "enemy" within each person who embodies the traits that a person tries to suppress. This shadow-self can sometimes emerge, or cause a person to lash out at people he thinks are similar to his shadow-self. Marlantes describes one of his alter-egos he calls "Sarge," who is lazy and smokes marijuana. When he would see his own son lying on the couch being lazy, he sometimes began screaming at him, as if he was screaming at "Sarge" himself.

The shadow self can also emerge to cause a person to commit atrocious acts, Marlantes claims. He categorizes three kinds of atrocities: "white-heat" atrocities that are committed while a person has full command of his logic and reason, "red-heat" atrocities where a person is so filled with rage that he loses all logic, and the "atrocity of the fallen standard" which occurs when a gap develops between what a society claims and what it actually expects.

Marlantes provides examples of each of these kinds of atrocity. He uses an extended story from his own experience to illustrate a "white-heat" atrocity that he participated in. He tells of a soldier in his command called Canada who was known for carrying a large, heavy gun into battle. Canada had been teased by some of the other soldiers who claimed he could not possibly fire the gun accurately. In a dramatic demonstration, Canada showed that he was very capable with the gun after all.

Canada was wounded during a fight to take over a certain hill and was being treated for his wounds. When the fighting turned against the Marines, Canada jumped up and joined the battle, charging up the hill with his gun. His action led to a victory in the fight, but he was shot several more times and died.

Marlantes and his men were determined to avenge Canada's death. Marlantes planned a "no-quarter" fight, which is a direct attack designed to be a fight to the death. He motivated his men by telling them they were fighting for Canada. During the fight, he rushed some of his men into situations where they were killed. Also, he himself shot down three Vietnamese fighters who were trying to surrender. These acts were all committed intentionally, he writes years later, in the "white-heat" of the moment.

As an illustration of "red-heat" atrocity, Marlantes tells the story of a soldier he knew named Mike who captured a Vietnamese fighter, bound him and beat him for several days, then hung him upside down from a flagpole. The man survived, but had he died Mike would have faced serious criminal charges. As it was, he was demoted and discharged without honor.

Marlantes writes that even those who had been in combat were shocked by Mike's behavior, however they understood that there was a point at which a person could snap

and commit such an act. These people should be held accountable, Marlantes adds, but our reaction should not be self-righteousness but sorrow. It could happen to any of us.

The third type of atrocity Marlantes illustrates is the atrocity of the fallen standard. Here he returns to the episode where some men in his command cut the ears off dead Vietnamese fighters and wore them as trophies. The moral standard of basic human respect had fallen. Marlantes and his men had all been told their job was to kill as many North Vietnamese as possible, and they began to see their enemy as less than human. This was displayed in the behavior of the men who wore the ears as trophies, like a high-school student would wear a letterman jacket, Marlantes writes. The way to prevent fallen-standard atrocities, Marlantes argues, is to make certain that fighters behave in accordance with the stated expectations and that those expectations are reinforced and enforced.

Lying

Lying Summary and Analysis

Lying is part of human nature, Marlantes claims in the opening of Chapter 6, and it is usually thought to be wrong to lie. In Vietnam, however, lying became normal for Marlantes and others. In fact, he explains, there were times when not lying seemed to be immoral.

Malantes gives the example of body counts. The higher officers who were in charge of the fighting measured success by the number of enemies killed compared to the number of American soldiers lost. The men on the front lines measured success differently. For them, survival was the measure of success.

Fighting was often chaotic and took place in thick jungle conditions where the position and number of the enemy were not clear. Part of Marlantes job as commander was to report the number of killed enemy fighters. His information was based largely on guesswork and probability and was influenced by his desire to make the fight seem worthwhile by reporting a higher number of enemies killed than the number of his own troops who were killed or injured. Since the number held no real significance to him, he inflated it.

He had a similar experience while flying as an observer over a group of enemy bunkers. He radioed the location of the bunkers to a navy ship sitting off shore, when sent a barrage of shells at the location. Marlantes' plane flew back over the site to assess the damage, flying through gunfire and dangerous conditions. When the ship requested a damage report, he told them there were no direct hits, but that the shelling had cleared the surrounding forest and exposed the bunkers so that bombers could easily find them. He and his pilot started flying back to their base.

As they flew back, the skipper of the Navy ship, a high-ranking officer, radioed them and asked them to return to the site and confirm their damage report. He was certain they had been mistaken.

Marlantes understood the meaning of the officer's request. He had to justify his attack with numbers and it was simply not acceptable to report no enemies killed or direct hits. On the other hand, Marlantes and his pilot knew the truth of the matter and were in danger of running low on fuel. They simply waited a short while and radioed back to the ship with false numbers of bunkers hit and enemy trenches destroyed. Later, he adds, when the Air Force destroyed the exposed bunkers they received credit for them as well.

Marlantes gives another example of when he lied out of a moral motivation. One of the men in his command, a young black man, was caught smoking marijuana, an offense that resulted in discharge from the service and loss of benefits such as college

assistance. Marlantes was called to pick up the man and two others who were caught with him. While driving them back to the base where they would be searched, he stopped the jeep and left it for a moment, pretending to need to use the bathroom, intentionally giving the men a chance to empty their pockets of any evidence.

Even so, when the men were searched at the base, the young black man still had a marijuana cigarette in his pocket. Marlantes took the cigarette and showed it to another officer. He said to the officer that the man was a good Marine and that the cigarette looked like tobacco. The other officer then made a point of loudly agreeing that the cigarette appeared to be tobacco.

This was a lie that was justifiable, but Marlantes also warns against lies told only for self-aggrandizement. he gives an example of a report he wrote about a severe battle his troops were in where he lied about the tenacious fighting of the enemy. What was different about this kind of lie is that he actually made himself believe it as he wrote it. Lying may be a natural part of the combat situation, he admits, but a fighter must remain aware of when he is lying and why.

Loyalty

Loyalty Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, Marlantes describes how he examined where his loyalties were as a young Marine officer in 1967. He was a 2nd Lieutenant in the Marine reserve, attending Oxford University in England on a Rhodes scholarship. While he disagreed with the politics behind the war in Vietnam, he had sworn an oath of loyalty to the Marine Corps and to the country and he thought constantly of his fellow Marines and friends who were fighting and dying. He was also in love with a young woman in England, however, and wanted to stay with her.

Marlantes had a friend at Oxford, another American Rhodes scholar named John. He and John talked extensively about whether they should return to the U.S. where Marlantes would go into active service and John would likely be drafted. Another option would be to avoid service by seeking asylum in Algeria or Canada. After a late night, Marlantes decided he would go to war. John decided to go to Canada.

Marlantes was still torn about his decision. He withdrew his scholarship money and went to North Africa, still thinking about the possibility of deserting to Algeria. He returned to England after a time, however, and reported for active duty. His decision was made without talking with Meg, the woman he was in love with, Marlantes writes. Moreover, he did not even consider talking it over with her first. Later he recognized how this had hurt her.

This was Marlantes' first time grappling with his own loyalty. He would face similar tests in combat where he had to test his loyalty to a larger group against loyalty to the people around him. He characterizes loyalty as being both upward and downward. Upward loyalty is the loyalty in the service of the larger group or to authority. Downward loyalty is equally important, he adds. Downward loyalty is the loyalty of a commander or authority to those below him.

Marlantes explains that in combat it was surprisingly easy to get around obeying stupid orders. An officer could pretend to misunderstand, claim a loss of communication, or even openly challenge an order knowing the officer giving it was unlikely to take any action. Still, he adds, he sometimes followed orders he knew put himself and his men into unnecessary danger. He asks himself where his loyalty was in these situations. He concludes it was not to himself or his men, but to the larger unit, the Marine Corps in his case.

This type of loyalty is important to the fighter, Marlantes explains, but it also results in the loss of autonomy. This is not bad, however. "We are generally delighted to be cogs," he writes, (p. 143) because it removes responsibility for our actions.

It is sometimes necessary to choose downward loyalty over upward loyalty, however. Marlantes gives an example of a situation where his unit was being ordered to hurry from checkpoint to checkpoint through the muddy and dangerous jungle without being told why. Three of the men in the unit fell down a steep cliff and were injured, slowing the group down. They were low on food. After a few days, they were atop a hill as darkness fell and an order came for them to hurry to yet another checkpoint. At night, this was especially dangerous. They had asked repeatedly why they were being hurried but were not given a reason. Had it been a mission to back up another unit in combat or to rescue injured fighters, Marlantes writes, they would have pushed through. But this situation seemed pointless. The skipper of the unit called Marlantes and his other officers together and told them he was considering disobeying the order to move. He could either openly defy it or pretend to lose communication. He chose to pretend he had not received the order knowing that he would probably be punished for it.

He was punished, Marlantes explains, but he gained the eternal respect of his men for his action and his loyalty to their well-being over his own.

Heroism

Heroism Summary and Analysis

Marlantes wanted to be a hero, he writes in the opening of Chapter 8, and he got what he wished for, although he hints that his recognition as a hero was not ultimately as enjoyable as he thought it would be.

Marlantes relates the story of how he received a Navy Cross, one of the highest Marine medals for bravery. His unit had been called back to the relative comfort of a base where they enjoyed hot showers and nightly movies away from the fighting. They were a backup unit, however, with their gear packed and always ready to mobilize on a moment's notice to help any combat unit that was in trouble.

The call came one day and Marlantes' unit sprang into action. They were airlifted to back up a unit in the jungle that was fighting hard to overtake a hill. The initial round of fighting had stopped by the time Marlantes' unit arrived, and they prepared to attack early the next morning before light.

The North vietnamese were dug in around the top of a ridge, firing down at the Marines, whose surprise attack was revealed when they ran across a listening post on the side of the steep hill. Marlantes directed his unit up the hill, trying to keep them spread evenly as they moved. He came across a young soldier named Utter trying to unjam his automatic rifle. Marlantes helped him, then pointed out a machine gun trap directly above them, over the lip of the slope. He told Utter to wait there while he cleared the trap from the side.

Utter did not wait, but instead continued up the hill in panic. Marlantes, still below the lip of the slope out of the range of fire, heard Utter cry out he was hit. He told another soldier nearby he was going to go get Utter out. The soldier warned him against it, saying he would be killed.

Marlantes writes that at this moment he knew that if he could save Utter, he would be eligible for a medal. He even mentioned it to the other soldier, asking only half in jest if he would write up an account of his actions for commendation. The other soldier said he would write them up, but that he though Marlantes would be dead.

Marlantes climbed over the lip and crawled with machine gun fire hitting all around him. He reached Utter and grabbed onto him, rolling together with him down the hill and over the lip. Utter ultimately died, but Marlantes received the Navy Cross for his actions.

After he left combat and was working in the Pentagon, the paperwork for the several medals Marlantes won was finally completed and he began to actually receive them. He was proud of his medals and thought they gave him influence among his commanding officers who had not been in combat. He grew his hair as long as was officially permitted and adopted a superior attitude. He changed his behavior when one Major took him

aside and told him he was not impressed by his medals and thought his appearance was a disgrace. Marlantes writes that he is thankful that officer gave him a shot of reality.

Heroism was a relative thing in combat, Marlantes writes. Many times officers were given medals for actions that grunt soldiers performed daily. The successful combat missions were the result of combined efforts and those singled out for medals were not necessarily the real heroes.

Home

Home Summary and Analysis

Returning home from war is as "mysterious" as going to war in the first place, Marlantes writes in the opening sentences of Chapter 9. As a young man returning to the United States after serving in Vietnam, Marlantes was stationed in Washington D.C. where he found that the sight of his uniform caused many people to avoid him or even to openly taunt him. In one incident he relates he was actually spit on by an attractive young woman on a train.

When Marlantes returned to his home in the Northwest, his parents met him at the airport. He was surprised to see that a young woman he had know in high school had also come to meet him. Her name was Maree Ann and he had not seen her since high school, but she had started to send him letters and packages in Vietnam. None of Marlantes extended family attended his homecoming. Looking back, Marlantes admits that it might have been nice to have received the support of his extended family but at the time he shrugged it off.

Maree Ann invited Marlantes to come home with her and he accepted, although he felt guilty about leaving his parents. He was grateful she had come to the airport to greet him and they spent the evening together talking. It was clear she wanted him to sleep with her, but when it came to the moment, he writes, he could not go through with it.

Part of his reluctance was that he had just been treated for a venereal disease he had contracted from a prostitute. There was more to it, however. He felt disconnected from the people in his past and from others he encountered who had not been through what he had. This feeling of being disconnected was amplified because of the unpopularity of the Vietnam War. Many of the people of Marlantes' age protested the war and were hostile to anyone who had taken part it in. He felt rejected and began to feel as if he had done something wrong. He began to feel ashamed and looked for ways to escape.

Marlantes was offered a position that would have returned him to the jungle of Laos, training fighters. The position would provide him with the same adrenaline as combat and he would be surrounded by men who praised and appreciated what he did. He considered taking the post but at the same time was contacted by Oxford University inviting him to resume his studies. He opted to return to school.

"There is a correct way to welcome your warriors back," Marlantes writes. (p. 195) Veterans do not need grand parades, but do need to be welcomed back and thanked by the people who sent them. Society needs to recognize that a returning warrior needs to "heal his soul." (p. 196)

Other cultures developed rituals to welcome back their warriors, Marlantes explains, and he describes a ceremony he devised himself with the help of a friend who was a

Capuchin monk named Brother Mark. Brother Mark performed a Mass for the Dead during which Marlantes imagined the souls of all the people for whose death he was responsible filling the church as well as the souls of friends who had died. Writing as if the spirits were actually present, Marlantes describes reading out his thanks and apologies to them and watching as they filed out, happily, in a spirit of friendship.

A few nights later, Marantes experienced what he calls a "dark presence" visiting him in his room. The presence was very real to him and filled him with dread. He returned to Brother Mark for help, and the monk came to his house and sprinkled holy water. Still the Presence, as Marlantes had come to call it, returned. He was finally able to prevent it from returning by burning sage and playing the chanting of a Native American man, the uncle of a fellow veteran in Marlantes' therapy group.

Marlantes believes his experiences point to a need to provide veterans with the tools needed to reintegrate themselves into society. They need to be supported and welcomed by their community, but they also need to be trained to view their experience in context of a larger role in society. Staying connected to other veterans is a part of providing this context, Marlantes argues, and he calls for an opportunity for all returning veterans to get together and talk about their experiences and plans before returning home. The military should take the responsibility to "detox" warriors before returning them to society.

The Club

The Club Summary and Analysis

"The Club" is Marlantes' name for the informal group of war veterans, and he uses it for the title of Chapter 10. He relates a story from his own childhood when he was a boy scout and had gone camping with a group of other scouts and their fathers. He joined the campfire one night as some of the fathers were talking about their experiences in World War II. They paused when he joined them, but continued talking about the war. This was Marlantes' first glimpse into "the Club."

Most people seem to need to feel they belong to a club or group, Marlantes' writes. Many cultures have initiation rites for young people that cement their association with their society. For men, this initiation is often linked to war. For young women the initiation is often linked to childbirth.

The club of war veterans observes an unspoken code of silence, Marlantes explains. It is not acceptable in our society to boast about one's military achievements, he writes, and so veterans are reluctant to talk about their experiences openly, even with family. He describes prodding his uncle, who was wounded in World War II while serving in Italy, into talking about his own experience.

Society encourages veterans to talk about the negative parts of their experience, Marlantes claims, but it should also be acceptable for veterans to speak about the pride they felt about their service. Those who welcome veterans back from war should be prepared to learn there are parts of war that are satisfying and even enjoyable.

Relating to Mars

Relating to Mars Summary and Analysis

In the final chapter, Marlantes brings the experiences he has described in the preceding chapters to bear on a proposition to improve the way society prepares for war and the way it prepares its warriors.

Marlantes organizes his proposal around five elements, which he presents as separate headings. The first heading is "Understanding warrior ethics and psychology: Waite's Dictum and The Warrior's Dictum."

Marlantes explains what he calls Waite's Dictum. In 1987 Terry Waite was sent to Lebanon by the Archbishop of Canterbury to negotiate the release of some hostages. He was taken hostage himself and held alone, blindfolded and chained, for five years. After being released, he told a story of being led to the bathroom one day by his guard. Left alone in the room he found a loaded rifle on the back of the toilet, left there by accident. He was being watched by only one guard and could have used the rifle to kill him and escape, but instead he took the rifle, stepped out of the room and handed it to his guard.

Waite described his thinking. He had been sent to convince the captors that violence was not the solution to their dispute. Had he resorted to violence himself he would have betrayed that belief. He could only have used a weapon, he said, to protect someone.

The Warrior's Dictum that Marlantes calls for is based on Waite's Dictum that violence is not the answer. What he calls the Warrior's Dictum holds that violence should only be used in response to violence. Pre-emptive strikes are not ethical, Marlantes argues. A warrior should seek to avoid violence. This does not necessarily make a nation weak or vulnerable, he is quick to add, if its rulers plan with this constraint in mind. It is also too easy for the legislators and leaders who vote to use force to see themselves as separated from the violence. Killing a person by ordering an air strike by a pilot is really no different than killing someone with a hatchet, Marlantes argues. Leaders with the power to order troops into combat should prepare themselves as warriors, too.

The second element of Marlantes' proposition is explained under the heading "The growing cynical 'No Holds Barred' attitude." Once a nation chooses a side and is committed to war, they should endeavor to win quickly by making a full commitment. Being aggressive does not mean fighting without ethics, however. He gives an example of the German panzer commander Hans von Luck who fought against British armored troops in the desert of North Africa in World War II. In his memoirs, Luck described a kind of agreement that developed between him and his enemies where each would cease activities near nightfall so their units could find their way back to base and avoid becoming lost after dark in the desert. When the British eventually gained the advantage and began attacking Luck's tanks from the air, the pilots waited until Luck

had moved all his men clear of the equipment before bombing it. Marlantes praises this approach to war, which recognizes that killing other humans is not always necessary to achieve the final goal.

Marlantes' third element comes under the heading "Bestial natures, control, aggression, and compassion." He calls for recognizing that aggression is a natural drive, especially in young men. Children should be taught not to be ashamed of their aggressive traits, but to channel them properly and to develop empathy for others.

The fourth of Marlantes' elements is "Incorporating spiritual and psychological sophistication into the conduct of war." Whenever he got promoted, he writes, he celebrated by getting drunk. It would be better if soldiers who were promoted were instead expected to reflect on their promotion and recognize their greater responsibilities for the lives of those they command.

Marlantes also calls for a structure that allows for more connection between older, experienced soldiers and the younger soldiers in the lower ranks. He tells about a gunnery sergeant who was in his unit in Vietnam. The man had been demoted and sent to Vietnam for discipline. He was overweight and out of shape and close to retirement and so was given an assignment to take care of the supply tent and base camp from which Marlantes' combat unit was dispatched. While he had no formal training, the sergeant assumed the role of a counselor to the young men who passed through the camp on their way home or on their way into combat. He had served in Korea and had been through the same things. this kind of interaction should be encouraged, Marlantes believes.

Finally, Marlante calls for a new understanding of Mars the war god. He presents a brief history of the Roman mythology which grew out of an older Indo-European tradition where the god of war was also the god of justice. Modern interpretations of Mars depict him as enjoying war for its own sake, but Marlantes urges us to reunite the concepts of war and justice so that violence is only used in the cause of justice.

Characters

Karl Marlantes

This is the author of the book. Marlantes uses his own experiences in combat in the Vietnam War to illustrate his argument about better preparing soldiers for the realities of warfare. Marlantes grew up in the Pacific Northwest and as a boy helped his grandfather on his fishing boat in the Columbia River. He joined the Marine Corps graduated from Yale University and attended Oxford University in England as a Rhodes Scholar. He left Oxford to go into active service as an officer and was sent to Vietnam. While in Vietnam, Marlantes saw active combat and was wounded by a grenade. He was awarded several service medals, including the Navy Cross for heroism. Following the war he returned to Oxford and later worked at the Pentagon.

Marlantes struggled with conflicting emotions upon his return from war and sought help from counselors at the Veterans' administration. He found himself angry and sometimes unable to cope with a civilian life that was so ordinary after the thrill of combat. He was also haunted by nightmares and visions of some of the terrible things he had seen and done in Vietnam. After many years, he developed a perspective that has helped him cope with the spiritual and psychological aspects of his experiences.

NVA

This is the North Vietnames Army or NVA. This group was Marlantes' primary enemy in the war. Backed by China, the NVA proved to be formidable fighters in the jungles of Vietnam. At the time of his combat service, Marlantes, like most of his fellow soldiers, sometimes thought of the NVA as less than human so as to feel less guilty about killing them, but he came to discourage this viewpoint among the men in his command, such as when some of his men began cutting the ears off of NVA corpses and wearing them like medals. Marlantes punished the men by making them bury the bodies, an act that led to some of them breaking down in tears. Like the American Marines they fought against, the NVA soldiers were mainly young men and teenagers. One fighter in particular, one whose face haunted Marlantes for years, was probably only 14 or 15, he estimates.

Marine Corps

This is the branch of service in which Marlantes served the Marines are know for their loyalty to one another, which is embodied by their motto "Semper Fi" which means "always faithful." The Marines are trained as combat soldiers and are often the first into the fighting. As a Marine officer, Marlantes saw extreme combat conditions.

Zoomer

This is a young Marine under Marlantes' command who was wounded in the chest in Vietnam. Zoomer appears in the opening scene of the book, gasping as Marlantes sits near him and whispers stories to him to keep him awake until he can be evacuated.

P-Dog

This is a black soldier under Marlantes' command in Vietnam who is arrested for smoking marijuana. Marlantes chooses to lie about P-Dog's possession in order to spare him being discharged from the Marines without benefits.

Mike

Mike is a fellow Marine who once captured a North Vietnamese soldier and tortured him for several days. Mike went on to a successful business career after the Marines, but was still huanted by his own actions. Marlantes uses him as an example of how combat can change a person's perspectives and behaviors.

Brother Mark

This is a Capuchin monk who performs a Mass of the Dead for Marlantes in an effort to reconcile him with the souls of the people whose deaths he was responsible for.

Grandpa Axel

This is Marlantes' grandfather who operated a fishing boat on the Columbia River. Marlantes helped his grandfather on the boat and relates some frightening experiences from this time.

Maree Ann

This is a high school friend of Marlantes who was among the few who came to greet him when he returned from Vietnam. While Maree Ann wanted to start a relationship with Marlantes, he was not prepared to return her attention.

Utter

This is a young soldier who was killed by machine gun fire during a fierce battle under Marlantes' command. Marlantes' efforts to save Utter earned him a Navy Cross medal.

Joseph Campbell

This is an author who wrote about world traditions of mythology. Marlantes had a long conversation with Campbell, who provided him with some perspective on his reasons for choosing to go to war.

Meg

This is Marlantes' first love while a student at Oxford. He left Meg to go into active service.

Terry Waite

This is a British hostage negotiator who was himself taken hostage for five years in Lebanon.

Objects/Places

Vietnam

This is the divided country in Southeast Asia where American troops fought on the side of South Vietnam against the North Vietnamese Army, which was backed by China. The war was unpopular in the United States and soldiers like Marlantes were sometimes confronted about their service after returning home. The conflict in Vietnam is usually called the Vietnam War

Columbia River

This is a major river that empties into the Pacific Ocean between Oregon and Washington. Marlantes grew up near the Columbia and helped his grandfather on his fishing boat at the mouth of the river.

Oxford University

This is a distinguished university in Oxford, England, where Marlantes attended on a Rhodes Scholarship.

Yale University

This is a distinguished American university where Marlantes graduated.

The Pentagon

These are the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense in Washington, D.C. Marlantes worked at the Pentagon after his service in Vietnam.

Quantico, Virginia

This is the location of the Marine training facility where Marlantes attended boot camp.

Laos

This is a Southeast Asian country bordering on Vietnam where fighting sometimes occurred. Marlantes considered taking an assignment training fighter in Laos after his service in Vietnam.

Napalm

This is jellied gasoline. Napalm was used as an aerial weapon in Vietnam to burn down jungle and kill enemy fighters. Marlantes had the capability to call in napalm strikes on targets he identified.

Navy Cross

This is a special award given for exceptional actions in combat. Marlantes was awarded the medal twice.

Mars

This is the Roman god of war. Marlantes uses Mars as a metaphor for modern warfare.

Themes

Shame and Pride

Marlantes admits to feelings proud of his service in Vietnam, even though he looks back in sadness at some of the things he did. His own pride and that which he felt for his unit and the Marine Corps in general led him to take risks with his own and others' lives. This pride turned to shame upon returning home to the United States where the Vietnam war had been controversial. He was avoided by some and confronted by others because of his role. Treated like an outcast, he bean to think that he had done something wrong.

It is thrilling to kill in combat, Marlantes admits, and this fact should not be ignored. Young soldiers who will enter combat should be prepared for the potential conflict they may face in their own feelings after killing someone. The shame of killing conflicts with the pride of having survived a dangerous situation. Furthermore, warriors may feel ashamed for feeling exhilarated while killing in battle. They should be prepared for these feelings before battle and receive support for coping with them afterwards, Marlantes believes.

Society should learn to recognize the reality of the conflicting emotions that combat can cause. Veterans do not need to be welcomed back with large parades or widespread recognition, he argues, but should not be made to feel ashamed for performing a violent role on behalf of their society.

The Warrior Dictum

Put most simply, what Marlantes calls the "warrior dictum" states that violence should only be used to stop violence. He relates the idea to the experience of Terry Waite, a hostage negotiator who was himself taken hostage and held for five years. At one point, Waite had an opportunity to escape when he found a loaded rifle left unattended by one of his guards. Instead of killing his guard and escaping, Waite gave the rifle to his guard, understanding that he could not profess that violence was not the answer to a dispute if he did not observe this ethic himself. Only to protect another person could he imagine himself using a weapon, he said.

Likewise a nation should only use force to protect itself or another nation, Marlantes argues. Furthermore, it should approach violence in the spirit of a warrior entering the "temple of Mars," just as he calls for individual warriors to do in Chapter 1. This means choosing a side carefully before taking action, but once committed taking decisive action aimed at ending the warfare quickly. Finally, a nation should not ignore the consequences of its actions and recognize its responsibilities to those who performed the violence on its behalf.

The warrior dictum would not allow for preemptive strikes, Marlantes explains, but it would not necessarily make a nation more vulnerable to attack. Leaders should adopt the constraint in their planning and development of international relations. He rejects the idea that it would be impractical to adopt such a policy. If a nation comes to recognize the importance of war it will chose to use it more sparingly and seek to avoid it, he argues.

The Concept of Mars

Marlantes uses Mars the Roman god of war as a metaphor for warfare itself. Like a god, warfare should be respected and calls for certain rituals and recognition that it stands apart from everyday life.

Marlantes entitles the opening chapter of the book "Temple of Mars." Going to war should be like entering a temple, he argues. There should be a clear separation between what is done inside the temple in the name of Mars and what takes place outside the temple. The metaphor refers to the blurring of the line between a warriors actions in combat, where he is expected to kill, and his role in society outside combat, where killing is wrong. Warriors should be prepared for warfare by understanding where the line is drawn and by being shown where their actions in combat fit into the larger context of their society. Likewise, when they leave the temple of Mars, there should be a ceremony or program that serves as a clear demarcation between their lives in combat and their "normal" lives.

Marlantes returns to the Mars metaphor at the end of the book by presenting a brief history of the Indo-European concept of god as both a force of justice and warfare. Somewhere in the tradition, the Romans separated Mars as a warlike force who enjoyed battle for its own sake. Marlantes calls for the metaphorical re-imagining of Mars as a god of justice as well. In other words, by viewing warfare as a tool only to be used in the service of justice a society will choose more wisely when it is to be used.

Style

Perspective

Marlantes' book is highly personal and his arguments are drawn directly from his own experiences in combat and as a combat veteran. He is writing about forty years after his combat experience in Vietnam and has a perspective colored by those intervening decades.

His own changing perspective on his Vietnam service is a frequent subject in the book. He recognizes that his perspective as a young officer in his early 20s was very different than the perspective he has now in his 60s. As a young man in combat, he was thrilled by the action and sought situations where he might be recognized for his heroism. He relates the two incidents that eventually resulted in his being awarded Navy Cross medals. His perspective changed once he returned home, however. He believed his recognition as a war hero gave him privileges, but was set straight by a superior officer who was not impressed by his medals. Marlantes perspective on his service was also under pressure from a society where the Vietnam war was unpopular. He was avoided and confronted over his service and made to feel ashamed.

As he matured and coped with the problems that these conflicts created in his life, his perspective turned to one of sadness. He does not regret his service, he writes, but he wishes now he had done some things differently. Finally he adopts a forward-looking perspective, hoping that others who go into combat might learn from his own experiences.

Tone

Marlantes mixes passages of persuasive writing with quickly-paced and frank descriptions of his combat experiences. The resulting tone is a mixture of the excitement of these battle descriptions and the more somber reflections of the author as he honestly assesses his experiences after forty years. When Marlantes examines some of the spiritual ramifications of his combat experiences the tone also approaches the mystical.

The opening paragraphs of the book tell the story of Zoomer, a soldier in Marlantes' command who was shot in the chest and lay gasping for breath waiting to be evacuated. The story is indicative of several other passages in which the author describes combat scenes in graphic detail. His intention is to relate the extreme conditions of warfare and evoke in the reader an idea of how these extremes might affect a young man experiencing them for the first time with no preparation.

Marlantes' frank tone carries over into the portions of the book where he is describing his struggles to cope with the conflicting emotions his combat experience produced. He is honest about his shortcomings, his drug use and the sometimes poor treatment of his

friends and family. He does not offer excuses, but seeks to explain the origin of his behavior and how others might avoid the same difficulties he faced by being better prepared. Some of his emotional struggles came in the form of nightmares and even visions of a dark presence stalking him. With the help of a Capuchin monk and a Native American Shaman, Marlantes performed ceremonies intended to reconcile himself with the souls of the people he had killed or seen die in Vietnam and to remove the dark stalking presence. These passages are presented in a straightforward tone, as if the souls and spirits he sees are real presences, giving the book a mystical tone.

Structure

"What It Is Like To Go To War" is divided into 11 chapters with a brief introduction and afterword. It is constructed as an extended essay, with the earlier chapters supporting a set of conclusions set forth by the author in the final chapter.

Marlantes also follows a roughly chronological order to his argument that follows his service as a young Marine officer in the Vietnam war, his experiences upon returning home afterward and his reflections on his experiences after several years. He illustrates the elements of his argument with experiences from his own service and the time frame shifts frequently within this general chronological framework. Chapters 1 through 8 each focus on a specific aspect of combat such as killing, lying, loyalty and heroism. Chapter 9, entitled "Home" describes Marlantes experiences returning home after warfare and proposes ways in which soldiers might be better reintegrated. Chapter 10, called "The Club," is about the informal club of combat veterans who have common experiences they might share, but who are often reluctant to talk. In the final chapter Marlantes summarizes his argument for the better preparation of warriors and the adoption of careful policies on going to war.

Each chapter is preceded by a paragraph that outlines the main theme of that chapter. Marlantes also includes occasional footnotes to explain references or military terms and jargon.

Quotes

"I wrote this book primarily to come to terms with my own experiences of combat. So far - reading, writing, thinking - that has taken more than forty years" (Preface, p. xi).

"The Marine Corps taught me how to kill but it didn't teach me how to deal with killing" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"When people come up to me and say, 'You must have felt horrible when you killed somebody," I have a very hard time giving the simplistic response they'd like to hear" (Chapter 2, p. 26).

"When I was in Vietnam killing people, I never felt evil or guilty of sin - and I was raised a Lutheran, so I definitely would have known a guilty feeling when I had one. however, when I returned to the States I got the message. Somebody had done something quite bad in Vietnam and it must have been us, since we were the only ones there" (Chapter 3, p. 49).

The least acknowledged aspect of war, today, is how exhilarating it is. This aspect make people very uncomfortable" (Chapter 4, p. 62).

"There is no defeating the shadow. We have to live with it. It is part of us. But having this shadow is neither bad nor good, although it is very troublesome" (Chapter 5, p. 87).

"In Vietnam lying became the norm and I did my part. in Vietnam, lying became so much part of the system that sometimes not lying seemed immoral" (Chapter 6, p. 114).

"To be effective and moral fighters, we must not lose our individuality, our ability to stand alone, and yet, at the same time, we must owe our allegiance not to ourselves alone but to an entity so large as to be incomprehensible, namely humanity or God" (Chapter 7, p. 144).

"A wise man once said to be careful of what you wish for, because you may get it. I wanted to be a hero" (Chapter 8, p. 155).

I needed desperately to be accepted back in. I think I ended up assuming unconsciously that I must have done something wrong to have received all this rejection" (Chapter 9. p. 184).

"Veterans need to boast more. Everyone needs to boast more. We simply need to learn where and when it's appropriate, as opposed to what we learn now - that all boasting is inappropriate" (Chapter 10, p. 217).

"Throughout this book I have attempted to honestly share my experiences of combat with an eye toward how I might have managed those experiences with more wisdom and psychological, spiritual and ethical maturity" (Chapter 11, p. 220).

Topics for Discussion

How does Marlantes' perspective on war change?

Is the author's "warrior dictum" to only use violence in response to violence a practical rule for an individual or for a nation?

How does Marlantes think soldiers should be prepared spiritually for warfare?

How does Marlantes approach the notion of sin and guilt? Does being a warrior change the meaning of these words?

What role should society play in supporting warriors,according to Marlantes?

Is it ever right to kill? What does Marlantes think?

Discuss Marlantes description of loyalty. What role does it play in being an ethical warrior?

Is it possible to be a "moral fighter?"