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Jump Starting Your Professional Reading Program: A Six-Pack of Books

Kelly Jones and Scott Shaw

Full Disclosure: We, the authors of this article, are die-hard readers. We love reading, especially anything that can help make us and our Soldiers more effective leaders in this profession of ours in which learning is an absolute imperative. We've incorporated professional reading into our personal development, and we've integrated it as a fundamental part of our leader development program in our units. Additionally, over the past four years we have led the "Pro Reading" part of the Platoon Leader and Company Command online professional forums, which members can find at <http://ProReading.army.mil>. In that role, we've been exposed to what other members of the profession are reading and what books are making an impact on leaders across our Army.

If one thing is clear about our current fight, it is that junior leaders are being given much more autonomy than many of us ever had. In order to deal with the ever increasing responsibilities of today's platoon leaders, we, the company commanders and field grade officers of our Army, must give these young bucks and buckettes the tools to succeed. This includes the nurturing of analytical skills (Troop Leading Procedures) in conjunction with the intuitive leadership skills that are necessary in combat, and the ability to deal with the aftermath of combat as well. The question is how to do that without breaking the bank. When the price of a platoon leader learning his or her trade could be the life of a Soldier or several Soldiers, then we owe it to those Soldiers to educate their leaders before entering the fray.

One powerful way to develop your leaders is through a professional reading program. The fundamental assumption informing this article is that professional reading is critical not only to individual development but also to collective learning and development in our units. Many of you are undoubtedly saying, "It's too hard. My platoon leaders aren't interested. And, I don't have the time to do it when I am in between deployments." We hear what you are saying and counter it with, "If we could figure out how to do it, then you can too." A dedicated professional reading program costs the unit less than a hundred dollars – and if you have a library near-by, possibly nothing – and builds the mental Rolodex of a platoon leader.

To jump-start a reading program, you have to start out with some sort of "What do I want to get out of this?" question. That may seem intuitive, but many leaders just throw out random books, and the result is less than desirable. With the hundreds of books and multitudes of reading lists out there for a platoon leader, how do you narrow down the scope of your reading to what is applicable to you? We don't have *the* answer, but we would like to share some suggestions. Based on our experience, we offer six books that we believe are classic volumes to give to

platoon leaders to start discussion on issues from the tactical to the ethical and everything in between.

The PL Six-Pack

We selected books that appealed to us and others on both personal and professional levels. These books are constantly revisited on the website, commented on, and discussed. They are perennial favorites of ours and many others. They are combat focused. They are listed in no certain order.

The Pro-Reading Challenge (FREE BOOKS)

To Company Commanders: Choose a book and the Pro-Reading team will mail you copies to read and discuss with your platoon leaders. Part of this includes creating a space in the online forum specifically for you to discuss the book.

When you and your leaders read together with an eye toward practical applications, the conversations that result will improve your unit's performance. The emphasis of the pro-reading challenge is on the conversations *about* the reading, which happen with the leader creates space for it—during a meal, around the HMMWV hood, and online.

Leaders who participate in the Pro-Reading Challenge are very intentional about choosing books that tie in with what they are trying to accomplish. They choose books that reinforce what they are already doing, and they situate the program and the conversations in the “now” experiences of their leaders. In other words, they focus their leaders on the “So what, how does this apply to us as a unit?”

If you are interested, visit <http://ProReading.army.mil> and write Niel Smith, who is stepping up to lead the Pro-Reading forum (pro.reading@us.army.mil). Alternate email: cocmd.team@us.army.mil.

[The Killing Zone: My Life in the Vietnam War](#) – Frederick Downs (ISBN-10: 0393310892). The Killing Zone is the story of a platoon leader in Company D, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry as part of 3rd Bde, 4th Infantry Division during 1967. Downs goes through a growing period from green lieutenant to seasoned platoon leader. This book enables you to put lieutenants into a situation that they are comfortable with – a tactical situation not unlike something that they did in ROTC or at West Point. It presents ethical, moral, and tactical challenges such as asking what they might do in certain situations. Several company commanders have used it as a primer for deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

[Stalking the Vietcong: Inside Operation Phoenix: A Personal Account](#) – Stuart Herrington (ISBN-10: 0345472519). This book is a look inside both the intelligence world and the world of

tactical advising. It shows how one man was able to break into the Vietcong at the local level. Herrington's description of the "usual methods" and then his later use of cultural knowledge, language, and charm are brilliant and something that a platoon leader on the streets could emulate. This book shows why the step "Understand" was added to the battle command process.

The Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa: With E. D. Swinton's "The Defence of Duffer's Drift" - Michael L. Burgoyne, Albert J. Marckwardt (ISBN-10: 0226080935). This book, by two amazing captains of cavalry, presents a modern day look at countering insurgency. It is "The Defense of Duffer's Drift" using Iraq as a backdrop and includes that book as well – one of our favorite books. This short read takes LT Phil Connors (of Groundhog Day fame) from the receipt of his first mission – control the town of Jisr al-Doreaa – and follows his actions through the six times that it takes to get it right. The book by itself is an excellent discussion primer, and the accompanying website (<http://www.defenseofjad.com>) includes the dreams in a series of vignettes that leaders can use, free of charge, before or after reading what LT Connors did. It can be an, "I can do better" or a "Here's what this guy did" for your officers.

Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat – James McDonough (ISBN-10: 0891418008). Platoon Leader, the story of 2LT James McDonough and his platoon in the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Vietnam, is the narrative of a platoon leader assuming command in combat. It is an intimate look at complacency in units and the aftermath of that complacency. McDonough's book is open and honest to the point of him freely admitting the mistakes he made that would be natural to any platoon leader.

Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest – Stephen Ambrose (ISBN-10: 074322454X). This book is a classic study of one unit from its inception to end and illustrates how much leadership matters. *Band of Brothers* (and the corresponding HBO series) follows one American airborne infantry company from its formation at the beginning of World War II to its deactivation at the end of the war while the books *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters*, by Dick Winters and Cole C. Kingseed ISBN-10: 0425213757, and others written by Don Malarkey, Buck Compton, David Keynon Webster, and Bill Guarnere serve as material to understand other viewpoints on how Soldiers view their leaders at all levels within a company.

On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace– Dave Grossman, Loren W. Christensen (ISBN-10: 0964920514). On Combat is an "examination of what it takes to perform, cope and survive in the toxicity of deadly combat."¹ This book offers a look at PTSD from how to survive and cope with its symptoms to helping others who may be suffering. As a book, it is particularly valuable to understanding what is happening to both the leader and those being led in combat.

An Added Bonus Shot - Once an Eagle Anton Meyer (ISBN-10 0060084359). Hailed as the book that re-defined our values as an Army after Vietnam, *Once an Eagle* is the story of Sam Damon from his enlistment in the Army prior to the Punitive Expedition into Mexico through two World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. This book provides a look at the hard ethical choices that

¹ http://www.killology.com/book_oncombat_summary.htm

our leaders must make in and out of combat and is a good primer for discussion within a company. It's a little long, but the read is worth it.

What Else Is Out There?

There are thousands of books that a company commander could pick up to start a professional reading program: The Thin Red Line, Fields of Fire, With the Old Breed, In the Company of Soldiers, Chewing Sand, Modern Warfare, Counterinsurgency Warfare and The Crime Fighter to name but a few.

The Payoff: The “Me” Factor

Sometimes in the end it all comes down to “the me” factor. What is in it for me, the commander? Why should I invest this time and effort when I could invest it somewhere else? The benefit for you will be well rounded platoon leaders with the skills and depth of knowledge to execute the missions assigned to them. The professional reading program will also help your platoon leaders develop *their* subordinates, the trickle-down effect if you will. The operating environment we are in requires thinking leaders at all levels, and a reading program can help. The book the commander chooses can reinforce the training objectives for the company, covering a broad range of subjects from cultural awareness to ethical and moral dilemmas faced by platoon leaders. We have distilled the list for you from countless sources to streamline the process of developing the Pro Reading program for your subordinates. The rest is up to you.

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Kelly and Scott continue to work with CompanyCommand.com's Pro-Reading Forum and welcome comments and ideas to help promote professional reading at the company and battalion level.

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