

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like To Go To War*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011.

Few Americans today have a personal experience of war. Most of us acquire our knowledge of war through books, news, movies and television. Depending on the source, we can gain a whole range of impressions: from being inspired by heroism to being disgusted by atrocities. Karl Marlantes's *What It Is Like To Go To War* may seem like one more round in the stockpile of war stories, but it offers more: It doesn't simply present the general difficulties of war, but addresses honestly the individual struggles that soldiers face.

For example, about a year after the Iraq War started, just as the first wave of troops returned home, a television news segment depicted the way one soldier decorated his truck: An obviously devout Catholic, he had put on the back windshield a large image of Our Lady of Guadalupe flanked by words to the effect of, "Forgive me, I sinned for my country." It was just a blip in the larger flurry of news coming out of the Iraq War, and was swallowed up by all of the debate and puzzlement over whether we should have been involved in the first place. From the beginning, there were many who questioned the rationale given for our presence in Iraq, and in many circles the venerable tradition of Just War Theory was considered in an effort to adjudicate whether or not our decision to invade was right.

The story of this particular soldier and his truck seemed different, though. Less of a comment about the war in general, it suggested something about his own actions in that war. This was not a question of whether or not the Iraq War was a just war, but

whether or not this particular soldier had been a just warrior. Evidently, he thought he had not. One hopes he was able, in the light of his faith, to come to terms with the decisions he made, but it highlighted an important question: How many other young soldiers have not dealt well with their own choices? It is one thing to make broad conjectures about where our nation should be focusing its military resources, but as long as we have and use those military resources, it will involve putting young men and women in harm's way, not only physically but interiorly.

On the surface, articulating what a just warrior is and how he should act seems fairly straightforward. We should simply apply our general understanding of what a just man is to the situations and decisions that one faces in times of war—easier said than done. Attempting to complete this project simply on the basis of impressions received in movies and news reports is bound to fail. Yet, a true understanding of the life of a soldier—from the day-to-day grind to the vexing moral quandaries—is not the common currency of modern discourse, which is precisely why a book such as *What It Is Like To Go To War* is so valuable.

Karl Marlantes presents a broad survey of the difficulties that a soldier faces in war based on his own experiences as a young lieutenant in Vietnam, and decades of reflection on those experiences in the light of history, psychology, sociology, and religion. The most captivating portions of the book draw on life-and-death decisions in the course of intense jungle combat. On their own, these episodes would simply melt into the background of the all-too-familiar action movie heroics.

The heart of the book is his honest and piercing consideration of what exactly was going through his head in the midst of the fray, what was motivating him and what he believed himself to be doing. Additionally, his frank discussion of the ways he dealt with these experiences after returning home—more bad than good, he admits—provides a stark view of the effect of the Vietnam War on the young men of that generation.



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One poignant example of his honesty comes as Marlantes recounts a particular assault that he led just after his company had lost one of its most beloved members. Right as he reaches the climax of the narrative, he interjects: “Thirty years later, while trying to write about this incident, I kept compulsively writing *then these three* [Vietnamese soldiers] *stood up in their hole. I was in a different frame of mind. I gunned them down.* But this was a lie. I did no such thing.”

His first three attempts to write about it were the same fiction that drew both much of the blame and some of the glory to himself for the atrocity that followed. In fact, his whole unit, with his sanction, had engaged in a “no-quarter fight,” not allowing the enemy a chance to surrender. He reveals what he was thinking at the time and how his decision had affected him over the years, to the point of lying to himself about his own actions.

While this honest assessment of the decisions he made and the effect these had on him over the ensuing years are intriguing, the book is not meant to be a personal memoir but a thorough investigation of the psyche of a young man at war and of a warrior returned home. Beginning with his own experiences and those of his fellow soldiers specifically during the conflict in the Far East, Marlantes draws on the ways that many cultures and religions have dealt with the fact of war and the personal struggle of being a warrior through the ages.

Much has changed about the nature of war and our attitudes towards it over the course of recorded human history, yet certain universal aspects to armed conflict emerge. Marlantes astutely observes and articulates the cultural factors that contribute to the psychological makeup of modern American soldiers. While the stories are his own from Vietnam, the message is very clearly aimed at soldiers heading into modern conflicts and the citizens that are sending them there.

While the responsibility for any particular act falls on the individual soldier, there is much that a society can and should do to prepare its warriors for the dangerous situations awaiting them. In general, our nation does a superb job training soldiers for combat, providing them with the best equipment to ensure survival and the completion of their objective, and training them to recognize and react quickly to threats and come out victorious. Yet surviving the physical threat is only part of the danger that our soldiers face, and the preparation we provide to face difficult moral decisions and to deal with the consequences of those decisions—whether right or wrong—is woefully lacking.

There is much that can and should be done by focused guidance for the young men and women we send in harm's way, but there are also broader issues that must be addressed: how we raise our children; how we treat our soldiers; how we treat our enemies; and how we think and talk about war.

Marlantes provides valuable thoughts and penetrating insight on how we might address these issues on the individual and societal level, with a view toward psychological, sociological, and spiritual considerations. Most of all, he stresses the importance of opening a conversation about them, the lack of which is one of the most glaring problems we face.

A constant refrain throughout the book is the need for each soldier to grapple with the moral difficulties that will arise in war, which, since they so often involve life and death, cannot fail to have a spiritual component. Although he does not confess a particular religious belief, he references his upbringing in general Christian terms and writes of experiences involving Catholic friends.

His attempt to address all people of whatever belief is noble—and clearly quite serious and sincere—but his insistence on the importance of recognizing and fulfilling the spiritual needs of young soldiers comes across, in the end, as somewhat platitudinous. His use of a variety of religious narratives and cultural myths, and his effort to reflect on them is, again, very insightful and commendable, but the lack of a consistent notion of what it means to be spiritually healthy affords him little basis for much practical or worthwhile spiritual advice.

Situations that almost invariably involve killing or being killed do not provide the most conducive venue for calm moral reflection. Thus, it is all the more important that our soldiers possess a clear understanding of what it means to be a just warrior before they ever step into combat—that is, if we wish them to come home not only physically but spiritually healthy.

A sharper and more perspicacious understanding of how we should wage wars will not make them less dangerous, nor will it render the particular decisions less stressful and difficult. But a healthy moral perspective will ensure that we fight with true honor as well as provide a framework with which to understand, accept, and learn from cases when we fail to live up to that standard.

What It Is Like To Go To War supplies a reasoned look at the interior struggles that a soldier must face in war, and Marlantes's reflection on those experiences contributes a basis for conversation about these issues. If we are to address honestly what it means to be a just warrior in the wars we will inevitably fight, more serious and honest reflection on how we have fought in the past and how to fight with honor in the future is indispensable.

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