

SUN TZU AWARD

(Complete and submit to your respective Platoon Commander upon finishing a book on the Commandant's Reading List)

United States Marine Corps Commandant's Professional Reading List Discussion Guide Updated 14 DEC 2012

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and discuss the books they read. All answers or responses should be embraced as *relevant*; there is no single right answer. All Sun Tzu Award submissions will be reviewed and boarded at the end of each month.

Date: 20140926

Rank: [REDACTED]

Name: [REDACTED]

Platoon/Section: [REDACTED]

Book: On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society

Author: LtCol (Ret.) Dave Grossman

1. In as few words as possible, what is this book about?

“On Killing” is, in short, a treatise on the resistances human beings have towards killing one another, the conditions and the conditioning that enables us to kill, the psychological effects of killing on the killer, and how those psychological effects can be mitigated by both previous conditioning and the way society treats veterans.

2. What made you want to read it?

Even before enlisting, ever since my grandfather deemed I was old enough to hear his stories from Vietnam, I've been curious about the subject of combat; how it feels and how I would react to it. Would I be able to live up to the actions of my grandfather? Would I be a coward? In the end, when face to face with an enemy, could I kill him? On at least a subconscious level I've always believed combat to be man's ultimate trial, that the best way to test your character was in a life or death struggle, and I believed that the best way to ensure success in any endeavor is to prepare yourself beforehand. To that effect, I wanted to learn all I could about combat, and when I heard of this book I couldn't wait to get my hands on it.

3. Did it live up to your expectations? Why? Why not?

I would definitely say that the book not only lived up to but exceeded my expectations. Not only did LtCol Grossman elaborate on the psychological effects of killing and how the actions of society can contribute to soothing or exacerbating cases of PTSD, he also provided first-hand accounts and testimonies from warriors ranging from the Civil War until modern times, and delved into the depths of conditioning in the military and the pressures that affect one's decision to kill, all the while tying the topics into each other and keeping the flow of the book consistent. The first time I read through the book I read it cover to cover in one sitting, something I've never done before with a non-fiction book, which I think speaks to the author's ability to engross the reader in the subject matter.

4. Did you learn anything new? If so, what?

There was so much new information that it would take pages to list it all, but some of the things I learned are how the changes in training methods over the decades have increased the firing rate of frontline infantry from around twenty percent during World War II to approximately ninety percent after Vietnam, that the “flight or fight” response when dealing with one’s own species more frequently includes the responses of “posture or submit,” and the pressures and conditions that enable or otherwise effect a person’s willingness and ability to kill. The conditions can be summed up as the demand of authority and group absolution, combined with the predisposition of the killer, the total physical and emotional distance from the target, and the attractiveness of the target.

5. Which part of the book did you find most interesting?

I was considering this question as I read “On Killing” for the third time, and as I turned each page I thought “No, *this* is the most interesting part of the book.” I can’t very well answer the question by saying “all of it,” however, and upon further reflection I found my answer. The parts of the book that I found most interesting were the personal accounts of warriors, especially those personal accounts of instances where neither party opted to kill the other, even during the midst of battle. Other accounts, those of heroic deeds and heinous atrocities, were indeed interesting and vital to the message of the book, but there was something about those stories in which the warriors refused to kill. When a tunnel rat in Vietnam comes across a VC soldier eating a bowl of rice, and they both just back away without a word; when Germans and Russians in World War II share cigarettes and help each other recover the dog tags of their comrades and afterwards each go their separate ways; or again in Vietnam when an American and Vietnamese soldier meet alone in the jungle, and both of them just shake their heads and walk away into the night; these stories speak to me. I feel that they illustrate a very important point, beyond the point the author was making. (He was making the assertion that evidence supports the existence of extreme subconscious resistance that human beings have against killing another member of the species.) I feel like the point that can be taken away from those stories is that our enemies are very much like us. Yes, the nature of our missions and our work necessitates that we kill people, and often the only solution to a problem is the killing of those people, but I think it is important that we remember that our enemies are human too. As much as dehumanizing the enemy enables ease in killing, I believe that a true Warrior would acknowledge the humanity of his enemies, that his enemies have family, friends, and dreams like us. I believe a truly noble Warrior can kill when called upon to do so, but can honor the memory and humanity of his adversaries as he would his comrades. That is why I thought that the most interesting parts of “On Killing” were the firsthand accounts of soldiers who mutually chose not to kill.

6. Did this book inspire you to want to do more research on the subject? Why? Why not?

This book definitely inspired me to do more research into the subject, especially after I learned that LtCol Grossman had published another book, “On Combat,” as a follow-up to “On Killing.” In addition, the bibliography of all the studies and other published works LtCol Grossman referenced left a wealth of information to delve into, perhaps from which I could derive my own conclusions and understand more. Though the information presented in “On Killing” is comprehensive, the subject matter is something that can never be studied enough, as it is intimately tied in not only to the military lifestyle but human nature itself.

7. Would you recommend it to a friend or another Marine? Why? Why not?

After reading “On Killing,” I fully understand why the Commandant included it in the reading list, and I have and will wholeheartedly recommend this book to any Marine I find myself discussing with on the subject. Not only that, but I would recommend that this book be read by Poolees in the Delayed Entry Program. I believe the knowledge of how modern militaries use their training to help condition warriors to perform in combat, and inoculate them from the psychological aftereffects of killing, would be instrumental knowledge to anyone considering becoming a Marine.

8. Does the subject of this book affect your life? If so, how? If no, why not?

As a Marine I would assert that the subject matter of “On Killing” has a profound effect on my life. The future is uncertain, and as every Marine is a rifleman I can at any time be called upon to kill in the name of the United States, a task and a burden I will gladly shoulder. I firmly believe that, even if it is only present in my subconscious at the time, the information presented in this book will help to inoculate me from the negative psychological effects of combat, if only partially. That partial inoculation could be the difference between becoming a psychological casualty or remaining in fighting shape.

9. What evidence does the author use to support their ideas?

LtCol Grossman supports his arguments with references to scientific studies like the Milgram experiment, which tested how far the average person would obey perceived authority figures; historical documents publications such as those from BGen (Ret.) S.L.A. Marshall, which exposed the low firing rates of the World Wars and helped developed the modern training methods which increased the firing rates up to ninety percent; and firsthand accounts from interviews with warriors from multiple nations and conflicts. LtCol Grossman ties in the theories and assertions he makes with supporting evidence from scientific and historical studies by expanding on firsthand accounts and illustrating exactly where his theories on the conditions that enable killing appear in the narratives.

10. Are the issues raised in the book controversial? Why?

Are the issues addressed in “On Killing” controversial in the sense that they cause debate between multiple viewpoints? I would say no, because the tone of the book is not so much persuasive as it is expository. It doesn’t seem LtCol Grossman is seeking to persuade readers of one viewpoint or another as much as he is trying to educate and draw attention to an issue of concern. Are the issues addressed in “On Killing” controversial in the sense that many people would not want to discuss them or examine them in detail? I would say yes, absolutely. As LtCol Grossman points out himself, the topic of what emotions go through the mind of a killer and what conditions enable a person to kill are rarely touched upon. So rarely were they touched upon that it was a shock when BGen S.L.A. Marshall revealed that only fifteen to twenty percent of infantrymen even fired their weapons during World War II. Society has instead come to think of warriors as those who LtCol Grossman calls “semi-psychopaths” and “sheepdogs” in a world of sheep and wolves, those who can kill without feeling any significant levels of remorse, that statistically only comprise roughly two percent of any military. In that sense then I would say yes, they could be considered controversial issues.

11. Does the author offer solutions to the problems raised in the book? How probable is their success? Can you think of additional solutions?

The chief problem presented in the book is solved by the reading of the book itself, that problem being a lack of awareness on the topic of killing. “On Killing” also seeks to solve the problem of the high number of PTSD cases by educating the readers on society’s role in affirming that the actions of warriors in combat were justified, that emotional support from the nation at large is crucial in the mental recovery of combatants. I share the author’s belief that this can significantly reduce cases of PTSD, though I would add that it would be immensely beneficial also to prepare oneself mentally as best as one can beforehand to help lessen the symptoms that would need to be dealt with afterwards.

12. If you were to talk with the author, what would you ask him or her?

I would be very interested to know if LtCol Grossman shared my view on the significance of warriors choosing not to kill, and if he also thought that honoring the humanity of your enemies was important to a truly noble Warrior. I would also want to ask him if any of the veterans he interviewed had a similar outlook, and if so how many. After an extended conversation I might also inquire of him whether or not he thought I was one of those personalities that comprise the two percent of military members that can withstand the act of killing with little to no psychological effects, as it's a question I've pondered frequently since first reading "On Killing," and I feel LtCol Grossman would be a good judge of character, especially in that regard.

13. Have you read the author's other books? Can you discern a similarity (in theme, writing style, structure, etc.) between them, or are they completely different?

While I haven't read any of the author's other books completely, I have read some excerpts of LtCol Grossman's book "On Combat," which does seem to have a similar flow and tone, though there's a slight difference in the theme compared to "On Killing." Where "On Killing" focuses on the enabling factors and psychological impact of killing, "On Combat" seems to mainly focus on the various stresses of combat and how they can be overcome. Both books, however, do address ways one can fortify against and treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and a section of "On Combat" re-visits the conclusions drawn in "On Killing" on the enablers and effects of killing.

14. After reading this book, have your views on the subject changed? Why? Why not?

I would say that my views on the subject have not so much changed as they have begun to take on a more concrete shape. Beforehand, my only experience with the topic had been from the stories my grandfather told about his time in Vietnam, and despite his willingness to tell stories as a series of events he was reluctant to speak of his personal feelings or any personal kills he had made with the exception of one particular story that I could tell bothered him. After reading "On Killing" I think I have a broader understanding about killing and its effects, though as LtCol Grossman says in the introduction, those who study killing who have not killed are like "virgins studying sex." While my knowledge of the subject has increased and my views and opinions have started to solidify, it's my understanding that killing, much like sex, is something that one has to experience for themselves before one fully understands it.

15. Why should Marines read this book?

LtCol Grossman quotes another author, Mr. Richard Heckler, who says "We long for the encounter that will ultimately empower us with dignity and honor," a sentiment I'm certain all Marines share. As Marines, the reality of killing and death is always present: in the way we train, the idiomatic expressions we use, in the typically aggressive mindsets of almost every Marine I've talked to; much more so than anywhere else in society. Since every Marine is a rifleman, every Marine should do his or her best to prepare themselves for the likelihood that they will be in a situation at some point in their career that requires them to kill. The best way one can prepare for something is with knowledge, and "On Killing" is in my opinion the best source of knowledge one can tap without committing the actual act of killing. Not only do I believe that the knowledge from this book will help Marines accomplish their missions by helping enable their combat mindset, but perhaps a Marine's life could be saved. PTSD and depression related to combat experience runs is a major problem in the ranks of the Marine Corps, as is the suicide which is most often related to those symptoms. Perhaps with the right amount of mental preparation beforehand the cases of PTSD and depression can be decreased, and maybe a Marine who would otherwise harm themselves will have the proper mindset and coping mechanisms to prevent an incident. At any rate, "On Killing" should definitely get Marines who read it thinking about how they might feel when they kill if they haven't already, which is something all of us should consider.

