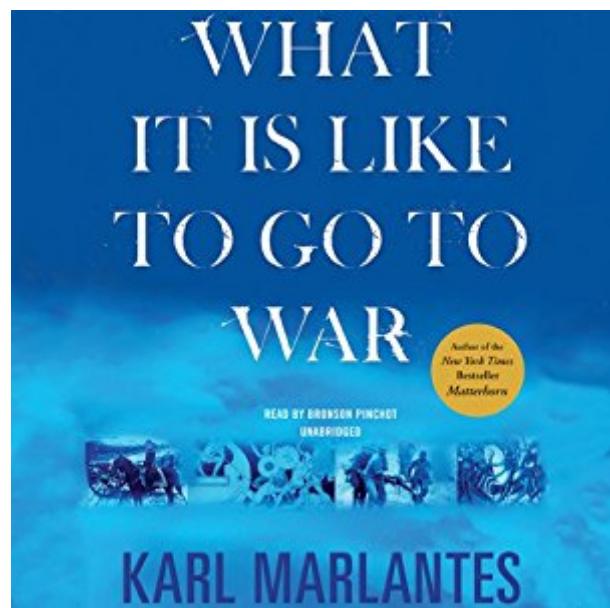


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What It Is Like To Go To War



Synopsis

From the author of the bestselling and award-winning *Matterhorn* comes a brilliant nonfiction book about war and the psychological and spiritual toll it takes on those who fight. "I wrote this book primarily to come to terms with my own experience of combat. So far-reading, writing, thinking—that has taken over thirty years." In 1969, at the age of twenty-three, Karl Marlantes was dropped into the highland jungle of Vietnam, an inexperienced lieutenant in command of a platoon of forty marines who would live or die by his decisions. Marlantes survived, but like many of his brothers in arms, he has spent the last forty years dealing with his war experience. In his first work of nonfiction, Marlantes takes a deeply personal and candid look at what it is like to experience the ordeal of combat, critically examining how we might better prepare our soldiers for war. Just as *Matterhorn* is already acclaimed a classic of war literature, *What It Is Like to Go to War* is set to become required reading for anyone—soldier or civilian—interested in this visceral and all-too-essential part of the human experience. Karl Marlantes, a cum laude graduate of Yale University and Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, was a marine in Vietnam, where he was awarded the Navy Cross, the Bronze Star, two Navy Commendation Medals for valor, two Purple Hearts, and ten Air Medals. He has lived and traveled all over the world and now writes full time. He and his wife, Anne, have five children and live on a small lake in Washington.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a remarkable book. I haven't read a lot of military literature, fiction or non-fiction; I have no

personal connection to the military and never served. But I am a high school teacher, and every year I see some number of students -- sometimes more, sometimes less; quite a lot more since the economy sank in 2008 -- leave high school and go off to serve their country. I wanted to get some perspective on what they were in for, and perhaps a better idea of why they did it, why they signed up when the conventional wisdom is always for young men and women to go to college. I got that perspective. And much more. I got a real glimpse into a soldier's heart and mind, told with clarity and great intelligence and heroic honesty; if for nothing else (and of course there is much), Marlantes should be honored for his willingness to delve so very deep into his own experiences, and to share them with the reading public in stark, perfect detail, hiding nothing. It made the book difficult to read at times, an experience that I can only think would be a thousand times more intense for fellow soldiers, but it made the book that much more necessary to read. I also got led through an insightful plan for how a modern nation should treat its soldiers, how they should be trained, how the officers should deal with their commands, how the public should treat their warriors before, during, and after combat. This is where the author's intelligence and education shine: calling on mythology, psychology, sociology, history, and of course his own experiences, Marlantes lays out a set of suggestions for the military that made me think this book should be not only required reading for past and future soldiers (which it should be), but also required reading for elected officials who intend to send soldiers into harm's way -- whether they themselves are veterans or not. The basic concept is that we must give our military men and women time and tools to adjust, both before and after combat, both in the short and long term. Soldiers must be prepared for what they will have to face -- all they will have to face, the fear and the excitement, the heroism and the honor and the horror and the lies -- and they must be given the chance to work through what they have dealt with afterwards; Marlantes shows how asking soldiers to return from the field to civilian life in as little as a 24 or 48 hours, as happened to Vietnam veterans like Marlantes, is perhaps the largest root cause of trauma for all involved, especially since neither our government nor our society have policies in place to help soldiers make that difficult transition. It's a shame, and it should be changed. I wish the book was a little easier to read; it gets a bit academic and complex at times, when the author is working through some difficult concepts -- such as the enemy within, or the idea of heroism, both in abstract and practical terms -- and some of the students I'd like to give this book to would have trouble following it. But I'm going to give it to them anyway, and they're going to be fascinated by it, as I was, even if there are some small bits they struggle with (Hey, I'm an English teacher; I'll help them through the hard parts.). Almost everything in the book is so real and so well-told that anyone can follow and appreciate it. And this book should be read.

I went off to war in 1942, and spent my time bombing Germany and watching my fellow flyers die at an alarming rate. Thus, I can attest that the author's splendid piece of writing conveys a realistic picture of war and its effect on the human spirit. General Sherman is reported to have said, "War is Hell". It certainly is, as the author found in the jungles of Vietnam, and I found at 25,000 feet above Germany. War is fire and explosions and machine guns pounding and dying men screaming for help. The author lost many members of his platoon. I lost five of my crew killed, and two (including me) wounded. Thus, war's combat is the same, wherever and whenever we find it. Likewise, the effects of combat on humans seem to be the same, no matter which war we consider. In Vietnam, the author describes his post traumatic stress disorder (PSTD) that caused trouble even after he had come home. His description had a familiar ring. I fought it for eight years after World War Two ended. Now, I read in newspapers that PSTD is a major problem for troops back from the Iraq and Afghan wars. But some things have changed. When I went off to war, it seemed like the whole nation was supporting me, and we came home from the war to adulation and happy times. In contrast, when the author came home, a young woman spit at him, and people expressed their contempt. Today, it is remarkable if we hear anything on the news about our troops in the Middle East. This very readable narrative is fascinating and disturbing, but it is well-worth your time.

In this reflective memoir, Karl Marlantes, writer of the widely acclaimed Vietnam War book *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*, takes a probing look at his own experiences of going to war, and of coming home again. Because it is more of a series of reflections than a continuous narrative, I will review it in kind, with some impressions and appreciations. First, Marlantes's book is honest, sometimes brutally so. And I think this is one of the keys that makes it work. The reader gets the distinct impression that he has carefully worked and reworked his memories until they come out as honestly and completely as possible. Even though at times this means recounting memories of his own brutalities in war. But along with these sometimes tortured memories come candid memories of his own emotions, impressions, and motivations that help bring the experience of war to life. They also guarantee that war isn't glorified, and neither is the warrior. Instead, we meet the brutality along with the valor. A second impression one gets is that these are carefully analyzed reflections. He has quite obviously held his own experiences, indeed his own person, under the light of careful scrutiny. This means the narratives and accounts he relates are thick descriptions of events, filled out with his own psychological analysis about not only what he and those around him experienced but why. And this also means he often extends his reflections

beyond his own experiences, through an analysis of why, to a discussion of what we might constructively draw from them. One key example that comes up repeatedly in the book is the experience of coming home from war. He recounts many of the difficulties of going from a life-or-death struggle in the jungles of Vietnam, where you are dealing death in a god-like fashion, to being rapidly transported via helicopter and airplane, back to your family and friends in everyday society in a matter of hours. And that jarring transition is made without reflection, significant preparation, or guidance. He recommends greatly increasing the debriefing and processing time for returning veterans, both before and after they come home. At one point he recommends returning to the WWII practice of returning home by ship: "We should have had time to talk with our buddies about what we had all shared" (150). And he says so much more about this key issue of reintegration and the need for acceptance, especially dealing with the challenges of returning from Vietnam to a country that didn't appreciate his service or the battle he was sent to fight. This important and timely issue alone makes the book a compelling and worthwhile read, and has given me renewed respect and concern for our current crop of returning vets. Last, in my unsystematic collection of reflections, I would say this book is vivid. It takes you not only into the battles but into the very experiences of being there and the psyches of the soldiers involved. The horrors of war are inherent, and an honest account like his helps keep us from sugar coating the experience and practice of war. He also raises interesting questions regarding the modern practice of war, with drone pilots dropping death by day and having dinner with the family "after work" in the evening. The psychological effects are hard to fathom. Marlantes writes well, with carefully crafted words and deeply reflective ideas. I hope this book gains a wide readership, as it has brought home to me a fuller understanding of the exercise of war and also a much deeper appreciation for the men and women we commission to carry out war on our society's behalf. I also applaud his aims to send out warriors who are better trained to face the psychological and ethical aspects of war, and I expect that his candid memoirs will be a tool toward just such an end.

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