

deeds of their service as these members of the Greatest Generation fade onto the pages of history. As such, *Voices of the Bulge: Untold Stories from Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge* is worthy of a thoughtful read.

What It Is Like To Go To War

By Karl Marlantes

Reviewed by Henry G. Gole, whose biography of Colonel Truman Smith, the military attaché in Berlin, 1935-39, to be published in the Spring of 2013 by the University Press of Kentucky

Karl Marlantes wrote the bestseller and prize winning novel *Matterhorn*, based on his experiences as a Marine Corps platoon commander in a rifle company in Vietnam in 1969-70. In his nonfiction, *What It Is Like To Go To War*, he takes his readers back to that time and place and to the four succeeding decades in which he examined his conscience and came to terms with killing and reentering civil society. This absolutely unique and lucid personal account and analysis will be read with profit by scholars, general readers, and most particularly, by veterans of close combat.

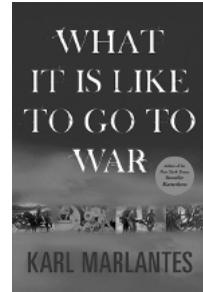
Note that Marlantes is very specific in defining just what he means by “close combat”: close enough to throw a hand grenade at a foe or to fire a rifle at another human being the shooter can see. Clarity on this point is important to him and essential to the book. Laymen tend to lump all Vietnam veterans in one heap. Those who have engaged in close combat do not. In a “combat zone” there are relatively safe places. A rifle company is not one of them.

The author is qualified by experience, education, temperament, and skill as a writer to make penetrating observations. Many are graphic, bold, and shocking. Some are erudite; some are ethereal; all are worthy of careful consideration.

Maturation from the late 1950s and into the 1960s cultivated two strains in his personality constantly visible in his writing. One is an intellectual appetite fed in his Yale and Oxford years and demonstrated on almost every page of the book. The other is an aspiration to join King Arthur’s court of noble men—or to accompany Don Quixote on a quest—manifest in both his choice of military service and his display of courage in Vietnam.

He tells us that he wrote the book to come to terms with his experience of close combat. That could have been accomplished in a personal journal, but he believes he might help other combat veterans “integrate their combat experiences into their current lives.” He also thinks he might provide young people contemplating joining the military “with a psychological and spiritual combat prophylactic, for indeed combat is like unsafe sex in that it’s a major thrill with possible horrible consequences.” (He is too wise to expect young men to read and heed his advice.) Finally, he wants policymakers to know what they are asking of the young.

His method is to reflect on a point important to him, to illustrate it with an anecdote or a combat experience, and to mull it over in sparkling prose that has the reader hanging on every word. His chapter headings



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identify themes: “Temple of Mars,” “Killing,” “Guilt,” “Numbness and Violence,” “The Enemy Within,” “Lying,” “Loyalty,” “Heroism.” The concluding three chapters indicate his concern for the need to integrate the earlier violence into current lives: “Home,” “The Club,” and “Relating to Mars.”

Mastery of our language and the creative use of poetic devices and images make his pronouncements memorable. To illustrate: Asking warriors to “adjust” to home after close combat “is akin to asking Saint John of the Cross to be happy flipping hamburgers at McDonald’s after he’s left the monastery.” And regarding military training: “Boot camp doesn’t turn young men into killers. It removes the societal restraints on the savage part of us that has made us the top animal in the food chain.”

His title might have been “What It Is Like To Return From War.” He writes that it was ten years after killing a man that he felt any emotion about it. Then deep remorse lasted months, a pattern for the next three decades. He knows that warriors must learn how to integrate the experience of killing, to put the pieces of their psyches back together again. But, “It is unfortunate that the guilt and mourning reside almost entirely with those asked to do the dirty work.” He believes that “drugs, alcohol, and suicides are ways of avoiding guilt and fear of grief. Grief itself is a healthy response.” Those called upon to fight violate many codes of civilized behavior. They must come to terms with stepping outside conventional behavior. He cites T. E. Lawrence (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 1922): “What now looks wanton or sadic seemed in the field inevitable, or just unimportant routine.” Then a truism in his own words: “The least acknowledged aspect of war, today, is how exhilarating it is.”

This reviewer gives this book very high marks. The most comparable works are philosopher and World War II veteran J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors: Reflections on Men In Battle* and professor of English and WW II veteran Samuel Hynes’ *The Soldiers’ Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, both of the highest quality. A small sample of other first-rate accounts of close combat and the reactions of warriors are commended—from WW I: Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, a memoir; Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel constantly in print since 1929; and from WW II: Sledge, *With the Old Breed*; Fraser, *Quartered Safe Out Here*; Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*; Fussell, *The Boys’ Crusade*; from the French war in Indo-China: Grauwin, *Doctor at Dien Bien Phu*, and from the American war in Vietnam: Nolen, *Ripcord*.

Another small sample of books dealing with shell shock, battle fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—whatever name is given the after-effects of the combat experience on young psyches—is particularly appropriate at this time. It would include these from WW I: Moran, *Anatomy of Courage*; Barker, *Regeneration*; Remarque, *The Road Back*; from WW II: Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness*; from Vietnam: Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*.

One deeply regrets the current clear need to understand what it is like to go to war and what it is like to return from war. Karl Marlantes has joined a short list of authors whose experience, sensitivity, and skill enable them to share wisdom with those among us who would understand.