

# A Catharsis

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

**A**s an infantry officer in Vietnam, Marine 2dLt Karl Marlantes demonstrated exceptional valor and leadership. For his combat actions, he earned sterling recognition (including not just a Navy Cross, but also a host of other combat decorations). More than four decades later, he is a thoughtful, contemplative writer, a Yale graduate and a Rhodes Scholar. His 2010 novel, *Matterhorn* (Grove Press, 2011), was a brilliantly conceived and executed fictional derivation of what he experienced. It is arguably the best Vietnam combat novel to date.

A year after *Matterhorn's* best-selling success, Marlantes' new autobiographical book, *What It Is Like To Go to War*, arrives with great expectations, not all of which are met. At the start he sets an admirable, if daunting, standard for himself:

If by reading this book before entering combat a young warrior can be helped to better handle the many psychological, moral, and spiritual stresses of combat, then the book will have been worth writing.

Marlantes incorporates his intense warfighting year into his later spiritual growth to conceive and share his insight, to benefit warfighters and policymakers. Marlantes' concept has merit, and his warrior credentials endow him with credibility. But his success in such a bold quest to influence change in how the American military prepares for war depends on his ability to convincingly expand personal anecdotal combat experiences to what he seeks to convey as universal lessons.

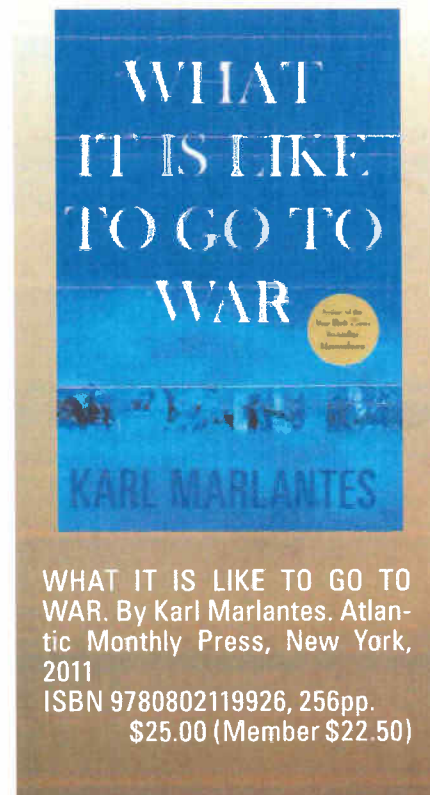
Marlantes confronts his past and his demons. His firsthand battlefield vignettes are as real and as stirring as his fiction in *Matterhorn*. Though he killed enemy combatants who would surely have otherwise killed him, he

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was nevertheless haunted and guilt ridden by the memories. He saw fellow Marines, barely out of high school, die or suffer grievous wounds; he perceived inept or wasteful command decisions—radioed from the rear—that he believed unnecessarily endangered Marines in the field. While these episodes drive his narrative, they take up only a small part of his story, and taken alone, they do not compel his conclusions. Surprisingly, he cites no standard or well-recognized military authorities. Rather, he weaves his own experiences with lengthy imaginary (and creative) conjurings with mythology.

Returning to America from Vietnam, he continued to relive and analyze what he endured. He discusses his own posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); he confesses to recreational drug use, even while still on active duty, assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps; and he speaks regretfully of casual sexual encounters. He asserts that “[t]he Marine Corps taught me how to kill but it didn’t teach me how to deal with killing.” Marlantes’ PTSD lingers still.

Now, he shares what he learned and inserts numerous references to mythology and ancient fables to provide context for his vision of improved military training. He formulates self-derived lessons to help prepare today’s youthful warriors and, at the same time, provide a more realistic outlook for decisionmakers at the highest level. For example, he wants training to better sensitize troops to killing. He laments what he sees as a killing ethos, embedded



in training, without remorse or understanding.

Marlantes goes astray in strained efforts to universalize his feelings, without meaningful evidence or authority. He was, and remains, generally antagonistic to America’s wars in Vietnam and more recent hostilities. Here, too, he is surely entitled to express his opinions, but he would be better served by more explanation.

*What It Is Like To Go to War* could and should have been a more complete and thus a better book. For a nonfiction work that aspires to be pedagogical, he should have tested his personal conclusions against those of many who came before him; for example, Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, S.L.A. Marshall, or John Keegan, to name just a few. As it is, *What It Is Like To Go To War* poses challenging questions and interesting ideas that are worthy of discussion. His proposals will provoke some partial agreement and much controversy and disagreement. The professional military should welcome the discussion.

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