

The Commandant's Watch List

Expanding the Professional Reading Program and Commandant's Professional Reading List

by 1stLt Isaac Caughran

If a picture is worth a thousand words, is a video worth a million? Technological advances have drastically expanded the options for absorbing information. You no longer need to sit and turn the pages of a book; now, simply click “play” and listen to the audio version while cruising down the highway on the way to work. Additionally, with the development of streaming services such as Netflix, Google Play, and Amazon Video, you can easily enjoy a movie or documentary on any topic imaginable. Once other platforms for information sharing are taken into account—such as podcasts or webinars—the possibilities are endless. While the media available for learning about various topics have changed, the Marine Corps still only recognizes one: text, implemented through the Marine Corps’ Professional Reading Program (MCPRP) and the Commandant’s Professional Reading List (CPRL). While the MCPRP and CPRL are important means of professional development for any Marine, this already-successful program can be expanded upon to include other media as sources of valuable information.

In order to have an intellectual discussion on a new way forward, it is critical to understand the evolution of the MCPRP. The MCPRP has its origins with the first Commandant’s Reading List, issued by Gen Alfred M. Gray in 1988. Former White House Chief of Staff, Gen John Kelly, USMC(Ret), a notoriously voracious reader, was assigned to help create the first list. He was known for waking up at 0300 to devote two hours to reading before starting

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Expand the MCPRP and CPRL to include other sources of information. (Photo by Cpl Jovane Holland.)

his day. The Marine Corps was one of the first DOD organizations to develop and implement a professional reading program. Not only are we known as “the first to fight,” we were also one of the “first to read.” Through our example, the program was soon replicated in other professional industries and various other DOD agencies such as, the U.S. Army and the Defense Intelligence Agency. The list of titles in the CPRL and the implementation of the

MCPRP evolved with each Commandant adding his personal flavor to the programs. While the various selection of titles throughout time can always be debated, there is no argument regarding the level of enhancement in professional education the MCPRP and CPRL have provided the Corps.

The goal of any educational medium is the highest degree of retention in the shortest amount of time. The average person can read at a rate of approxi-

mately 300 words per minute,¹ and with the average book length being about 64,000 words,² the average time it takes to read a book is roughly four hours. When it comes to our brains, images and visuals enhance our ability to process information. Research compiled by Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing found that visuals are processed 60,000 times faster than text.³ This is not surprising, considering we are evolutionarily wired to respond faster to visual information from our environment than our relatively recent invention of text. The synapses in your brain when reading the sign “Beware of Bears” operate quite differently than when walking along a trail and seeing a 600-pound Grizzly.

When it comes to the goal of retention, video far surpasses text. The average reading comprehension of approximately 60 percent⁴ means that nearly half of whatever a Marine decides to read will not be retained, including this article. Alternatively, one study showed that viewers retain 95 percent of a message when watched in a video compared to 10 percent when reading it in text.⁵ This statistic does not mean the average movie or documentary viewer will remember 95 percent of what they watched but more so that comprehending the message of a story through video is easier than through text. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics:

In the 2013–17 period, the U.S. civilian noninstitutional population ages 15 and older spent an average of 2 hours 46 minutes per day watching TV. This amounted to more than half (55.2 percent) of the total time per day they spent in leisure and sports activities. As defined in the ATUS, watching TV refers to any time people said their main activity involved watching TV, videos, or movies. This includes the time spent watching live programming, viewing DVDs, and streaming shows on their TV sets, computers, and portable devices. It does not include time spent viewing movies at a theater.⁶

At this point, we could easily divert into a discussion of whether watching that amount of television and having that amount of screen time is beneficial

for any one person and the importance of “everything in moderation,” but that is not the purpose of this article. Ultimately, it must be understood that video consumption is here to stay and will surely only increase as technology advances. I would like to see the Marine Corps compete for this screen time by providing a program for Marines to spend some of that time watching titles on military history, Marine Corps history, professional development speeches, or presentations in leadership.

Words carry strong connotations behind them; thus, what would be an appropriate name for this program? One potential solution is to not deviate too far from the current titles and simply change “reading” to “education” and add “watch” to the titles: The Marine Corps Professional Education Program (MCPEP) and The Commandant’s Professional Reading and Watch List (CPRWL). Changing “reading” to “education” encapsulates various education media and not just text. The addition of the word “watch” explains the idea of important titles the Commandant wants Marines to not only read but also watch.

This all sounds acceptable, but what will the implementation look like? First, there is a social stigma around staring at a screen versus a book, and this stigma is definitely a hurdle leaders need to overcome in the implementation of the MCPEP and CPRWL. Not much needs to differ from the MCPRL and CPRL. Much the same way as the CPRL, recommended titles will be listed by the “Commandant’s Choice” and by “Grade Level.” Verification of completion and documentation will read like *ALMAR 015/17*, which states,

Completion of the CPRL reading requirements shall be noted in the individual Marines fitness report or taken into account when assigning Proficiency/Conduct marks. How a Marine demonstrates completion of the annual requirements is at the discretion of the commander.⁷

I propose a similar model for the MCPEP and CPRWL, in which commanders are afforded the latitude to verify completion and comprehension, with

recognition and incentivizing done through formal documentation and consideration on a Marine’s fitness report or proficiency/conduct marks. As a commander, it will be a lot easier to gather a platoon or squad together to watch *Band of Brothers* or *The Pacific* and have a group discussion about tactics, leadership, and the effects of combat as opposed to gathering a platoon book club followed by a Socratic seminar.

This brings us to the discussion of titles. What titles would be most beneficial for Marines to watch? Well, much the same way we could debate which books are best for the CPRL it is impossible to concoct a watch list every person agrees upon; however, I propose to start the debate with a list of my own. This is *not* an all-inclusive list, rather just a list to help stimulate a discussion and the potential format of the program.

- *Band of Brothers*: HBO mini-series (Military History/Leadership).
- *The Pacific*: HBO mini-series (Military/Marine Corps History/Leadership).
- Simon Sinek’s *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*: TED Talk (Leadership).
- *Saving Private Ryan*: Movie (Military History/Leadership).
- *Mankind: The Story of All of Us*: History Channel mini-series (World History).
- *Black Hawk Down*: Movie (Military/Army History)
- *American Experience: The Battle of Chosin*: Documentary (Marine Corps History)
- *Flags of Our Fathers*: Movie (Military/Marine Corps History).
- *Zero Dark Thirty*: Movie (Military History).
- *Occupied*: Mini-series (Military Fiction).
- *Zero Days*: Documentary (Cyber Warfare).
- *The Marines*: PBS Documentary (Marine Corps History/Culture).
- *Heartbreak Ridge*: Movie (Leadership/Marine Corps Culture).
- *Chosin*: Documentary (Marine Corps History).
- *Fire and Ice: The Winter War of Finland and Russia*: Documentary (Military History).

- *Eagle Eye*: Movie (Cyber Warfare).
- Stanley McChrystal's *Leadership is a Choice*: Presentation/Speech (Leadership).
- *America: The Story of Us*: History Channel mini-series (American History).
- *20th Century Battlefields: Episode 1-1918 Western Front*: Documentary (Military/Marine Corps History).
- *We Were Soldiers*: Movie (Military History/Leadership).
- *Restrepo*: Documentary (Military History).
- *The Hurt Locker*: Movie (Military Fiction).

Like the CPRL, the intent of any titles on the list is to both increase a Marine's knowledge of historical concepts and events, and expand his imagination of the future of warfare and the type of battlefields he might encounter. Additionally, there is a vast library of informative speeches and presentations on organizational behavior topics such as

leadership, communication, and group dynamics that will be equally beneficial for Marines to spend time watching.

I do not want to replace or remove the MCPRP or CPRL. Quite the contrary, I desire to expand upon their successes. There are numerous advantages to reading, and I myself am a voracious reader, aiming to read two books per month. I also, however, believe the inclusion of video as a means of self-education can improve and deepen the education of the individual Marine and in turn the Corps as a whole. The creation of a CPRWL will give leaders another powerful method of recognizing and incentivizing professional self-education with a 21st century approach.

Notes

1. Brett Nelson, "Do You Read Fast Enough to Be Successful," *Forbes Magazine*, (New York, NY: December 2012).

2. Maddrel Crum, "Average Book Length: How Many Words There Are in a Novel," (Online: March 2012), available at <https://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

3. Rachel Gillett, "Why We Are More Likely to Remember Content with Images and Video Info," *Fast Company*, (Online: September 2014), available at <https://www.fastcompany.com>.

4. N. Al-Othman, "The relationship between online reading and performance on proficiency tests," *The Reading Matrix*, (Online: 2003), available at <https://semanticscholar.org>.

5. "Why We Are More Likely to Remember Content with Images and Video Info," *Fast Company*, (Online: September 2014), available at <https://www.fastcompany.com>.

6. Rachel Krantz-Kent, "Television Capturing America's Attention," Bureau of Labor Statistics, (Washington, DC: September 2018).

7. Headquarters Marine Corps, "Revision of the Commandants Professional Reading List," *Marines*, (Washington, DC: May 2016).



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