

## **Karl Marlantes: The One-Day Crash Course**

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*What It Is Like to Go to War* offers the instructor a number of avenues of approach. As a memoir of one man's experiences in the Vietnam era as a civilian, a garrison Marine, and a combat-deployed Marine, the book offers a view of young LT Marlantes in the middle of historical forces greater than himself. Marlantes, a serious but naive young man from an Oregon fishing community, graduated from Yale before electing to turn down a Rhodes Scholarship to fulfill his commitment to the Marines, a commitment that he recalls honoring not so much as a true believer in the war but as someone who took an oath, and whose conscience would not allow him to hang back as what President Johnson called "a cocktail critic" (137). As such, Marlantes makes an intriguing parallel to our plebes, who have elected to come to USNA during a period when despite the gradual winding down of our combat operations in central Asia they are placing themselves at a considerable risk vice their civilian peers.

As Marlantes's stories from his deployments detail, however, other options are available in the classroom. As the author of a war memoir, his honesty is stirring, though his accounts of battles and bureaucratic infighting in the rear are clearly part of the genre expectations of both military memoir and war fiction. His particular experiences and meditations, however, offer a number of angles from which to approach the subject of war. The first chapter, "Temple of Mars," offers an examination of what he calls the "sacred space" of a combat theatre where death becomes immediately present and the self is submerged in a larger collective experience (19). The effects of this experience (which seems to echo the Nietzschean Dionysian experience) affects the individual psyche for both good and ill, as often seems to be the case in classical epics

as well as modern war literature. (The Homeric component of Marlantes's thought should be as obvious as the Nietzschean.) The chapter on "Killing" offers an unapologetic view of the deaths that Marlantes was responsible for in combat combined with a tragic awareness of the frequent futility of war and the ease with which legitimate combat operations can become atrocities fueled either by passion ("red heat" atrocities, as he calls them) or a cold, cruel desire to get revenge and inflict suffering through rational, programmatic action ("white heat" atrocities) (89). Asked decades after the war how he feels about killing in war, Marlantes replies that he feels "sadness" (27), while also advocating fiercely that American society needs to allow young combat veterans room to experience both pride and grief over their actions. This double helix of pride and grief structures the entire book, from moments where Marlantes speaks with great pride of the awesome force controlled by a USMC lieutenant in the field to moments where he speaks with wrenching candor of his decades-long attempts to bury, then finally deal with, the trauma he endured in Vietnam. On any question that his subject might raise, Marlantes is clearly of two minds. Perhaps nowhere, however, is that ambivalence more potentially useful than in the book's eighth chapter, "Heroism".

"Heroism" centers the book, which veers from combat memoir to PTSD diary, from personal history to somewhat grandiose structuralist meditation on the mythological import of warfare. By the end of the first seven chapters, the reader has had the chance to meet both LT Marlantes and the civilian that he becomes afterward; we have seen him grow up in a series of flashbacks involving his fisherman grandfather, and seen him choose to honor his commitment to the Marines rather than stay at Oxford or flee to Canada; we have seen him both succeed and fail catastrophically as a junior officer, most notably in an episode where his desire to wipe out a retreating unit of NVA gets one of his men, whom Marlantes viewed as a younger

brother, killed. We have also heard the anger in his voice as he indicts the culture of lying that he experienced in the Marine Corps as body counts were wildly inflated while missions were being written up, and we have seen some of his initial struggles to undo the damage that the war did to him. The first seven chapters dealt with themes like “Killing” and “Guilt,” and the remaining three chapters will address the experience of reintegration into society and the distinct social subgroup formed in the United States by combat veterans. Situated in the middle of the narrative, then, we find Marlantes’s assessment of the human desire for status and distinction as it played out in his own mixed motives for engaging in two different sets of heroic actions for which he won a Bronze Star and a Navy Cross, respectively.

Both episodes involve assaults on fortified hillsides. In the first episode, Marlantes abandons his post as Company XO and goes into action with the platoon he formerly commanded, at one point running into the line of fire to rescue a wounded Marine who dies shortly thereafter. Marlantes jokes recklessly with the platoon staff sergeant about whether the sergeant will put Marlantes in for a medal if he rescues the young Marine, Udder. With Udder “saved” and the fight over, Marlantes goes into great detail describing the (also heroic) efforts of a corpsman to save the wounded man, who eventually dies. The futility of the episode on both parts is made clear, however, when the corpsman discovers a round in Udder’s brain. As Marlantes notes, “I could have put it there myself when I was trying to keep the machine-gun fire down as I crawled up to him. I’ll never know” (168). Marlantes does not spare himself in recounting this episode, taking the blame for actions ranging from running in unnecessarily to keep an eye on the green commander of his old platoon to acting a fool in his discussion with the sergeant. Perhaps the most scathing moment, however, from a reader’s perspective, comes in Marlantes’s analysis of his own mindset before running up the hill. Part of Marlantes wanted to

save Udder because he was a wounded Marine, one of his guys, while part wanted to remain safe. The deciding factor, says Marlantes, was that “I wanted a medal” (163).

This confession strikes me as the most painful one in the book, an admission that very few of us would care to make even when dealing with far less hazardous duties. Marlantes lays bare just how deeply this desire for distinction goes: “I’d always wanted a medal, ever since I looked at my father’s medals from World War II, ever since I’d seen Audie Murphy in *To Hell and Back*, ever since I was never chosen first when we chose up sides.” This desire for distinction leads Marlantes into a reckless act that might, it turns out, actually have resulted in Udder’s death. Moreover, Marlantes shows the reader the ugly side of a person that can emerge once the desire for a medal has been sated. Finishing out his service time in the Pentagon, Marlantes’s paperwork keeps catching up with him and delivering new medals. Feeling gratified by the collection of medals on his chest, Marlantes becomes insolent, lets his uniform standards go, and begins to flout the USMC’s rules whenever he can until called out on his behavior by a far less-decorated superior officer, a major in another department. Having long since forgotten the man’s name, the older authorial Marlantes says that he wishes he could thank the Major personally for that dressing down (164).

Marlantes’s meditation on the Bronze Star and his account of his subsequent stateside behavior seem to me the most useful “ins” for a roomful of plebes. Relatively few individuals in a roomful of mids will already have combat decorations, and (one hopes) comparatively few of them will eventually be called upon to perform actions worthy of such lofty decorations. Each of them, however, has inside them that same desire for distinction. USNA recruits students who, to one degree or another, want to lead and want to believe in their own potential for heroism. The school’s military structure, from the indoctrination period of plebe summer to the limited meting

out of off-yard dining privileges to firsties, reinforces this mindset. All of them want a “medal,” some mark of distinction, even if it is only their hand on the Commander In Chief’s Trophy or a “2.0 and go” diploma. In laying bare so much of himself, Marlantes offers the opportunity to ask your students to engage with the relevance of his story to their own, or the structural similarities between the Marine Corps as Marlantes knew it and USNA as they have known it so far. For those who really feel like jumping into this topic with both feet, Marlantes also describes the degree to which issues like rank, race, and the popularity of an officer with his enlisted can affect the awarding of medals. As I once recall a Commandant saying at a briefing, everyone in the Brigade worries that some other group is getting something they aren’t. Marlantes’s relative world-weariness about his medals when examined as an older man might be a useful cue for a discussion about that topic in a school where everyone is theoretically the same but also constantly being evaluated and ranked according according to a variety of scales.

It should be noted, however, that Marlantes does not dismiss heroism as mere gossamer and egotism. Indeed, he observes that after this first episode, at least until he returned stateside, “I was no longer so anxious to get a medal of any kind” (169). In recounting his next medal during an episode that prompts a great deal of grief for him throughout the book due to the death of his radioman during the fight, Marlantes offers a sense of the “phenomenon of being taken over by something, or someone” in the course of a fight. Pinned down during an assault on a hill where his unit faced elimination by the enemy, Marlantes recalls a lecture in Basic School about the time when a junior officer earns his pay. He realizes that “my time had come,” and takes off toward a machine gun bunker, zig-zagging up the hill laden with ammunition and grenades (171). Catching sight of movement in the corner of his eye, Marlantes slows his charge long enough to see that the movement is a fellow Marine, and behind him “a long ragged line of

Marines ... moving and weaving up the hill behind me” (172). “They’d all come with me,” relates Marlantes, “I was actually only alone for a matter of seconds.” With Marlantes leading the charge, the Marines eventually take the hill.

The episode is more complex than this initial account. Marlantes’s battle plan and his insistence get his former radioman killed. Marlantes is wounded, temporarily blinded in one eye. A helicopter crew gets involved. Marlantes wins a Navy Cross but a young African-American enlisted Marine who fought bravely wins nothing. All of these issues have, however, been prepared for by the chapter leading up to this thrilling conclusion. Marlantes argues that he was “no more heroic [in this episode] than when I went after Udder” (171), but the chapter’s implicit comparison of the two episodes evokes strongly both what the book seems to ask and what we as instructors are pursuing in our classrooms: how do you take a kid who wants a medal and turn them into a junior officer who recognizes when their moment to act has come and leads from the front? Put another way in terms of everyday heroism, how do you take a young man or woman and train them to be a leader in both quotidian and crisis situations, and then make sure that they are not damaged by the things that they may have to see or do?

## LT Cross and LT Marlantes

The fiction of Tim O'Brien is a go-to teaching tool at USNA. A graduating major told me a couple of years ago that he thought he must have read *The Things They Carried* in its entirety at least three times for English classes between his plebe year and graduation. This speaks more to the power of O'Brien's work and its relevance to the critical thinking skills that we pride ourselves on conveying to our students than to a collective lack of imagination, I would argue. O'Brien is, however, not without his risks in the classroom. Students, especially plebes, can have a hard time handling both the degree of critical distance that he maintains from the war and, much more obviously, the way that he questions the nature of truth. For many a plebe, or in the case of some HE112W students many a youngster, writing about war should not involve fiction because war is too important, too (as Marlantes himself might call combat) sacred. ("If you were there, why would you need to make stuff up?" a student once asked me while we were knee-deep in the meta-fictional wonderland of *Going After Cacciato*.) Our youngest students, still steeped in the indoctrination of plebe summer and plebe year and often eager to prove themselves as salty warriors, often also take their distaste for O'Brien out on one particular character: LT Jimmy Cross in "The Things They Carried." Comparing LT Cross, whose perceived weakness and inaction make him an easy whipping boy, with the very real LT Marlantes, could be useful.

The reasons for this rather common distaste for LT Cross are familiar to anyone who knows the story: LT Cross spends a great deal of the story mooning over a girl back in CONUS who does not love him, he thinks of her at critical stages of operations, and when one of his men (Ted Lavender) is killed he blames himself and burns Martha's letters. At that moment he promises himself that he will be a hardened officer whose vigilance will never slack as he enforces a steely military discipline. The story concludes with LT Cross making a series of vows

about how he will act and how he will present himself to his men that, while embodying a certain authoritarian, distant form of leadership, seem to have very little to do with the character of Jimmy Cross as we have come to know him up until this point—hardly a coward but a man with a gentle nature, slightly dreamy, given to poetic gestures even if he cannot always understand them himself. (He cannot make out why his beloved Martha, a poet herself, sends him a “lucky” pebble that she says embodies her feelings for her, but on patrol he carries it in his mouth and thinks of home.) Perhaps with the words of a training sergeant echoing in their ears, plebes often find LT Cross intolerably distracted, approving only when he rededicates himself to by-the-book leadership, which nonetheless cannot bring back the dead Ted Lavender. “You couldn’t burn the blame,” the story notes, as Martha’s letters flare up (23). (Whether LT Cross, occupied with searching a tunnel system even as he was also thinking about Martha, could actually have saved Ted Lavender from being shot while returning from a head call in the bush remains a topic of lively debate in my classes.)

Marlantes’s memoir provides, to begin with, a useful “real life” counterpoint to the experience of being a lieutenant a channeled by O’Brien. The book begins with Marlantes watching one of his wounded men fighting to stay alive while his platoon, stationed on a firebase atop a mountain, waits for a fogbank to lift so that a medevac flight can land. Distracted though Jimmy Cross may be in O’Brien’s story, one suspects that his distraction is not so different from that of LT Marlantes, who says that at that moment “although I could radio in my grid position down to six points, I no longer knew where the hell I was spiritually” (4). Surely part of this dislocation would seem to be a result of the awesome responsibility of leadership in charge of this firebase: “I alone would make all the decisions and count my mistakes with lives and pain” as the NVA assaulted his position. Marlantes’s command of the firebase is not without mistakes,

including some very severe ones. One of his platoon's mortars drops a short round, wounding three of his marines, one of whom sustains brain damage, and Marlantes discovers for the first (but not, he says, the last) time "the terrible feeling of responsibility and guilt for the death and wounds of my men" (6), an experience that he will trace to a slightly loosened leg on a mortar a minor detail that he "should have" caught during a routine weapons inspection in a situation where he was charged with defending a position against a potentially overwhelming force. "In combat, inattention to details can kill people," says Marlantes, but his reflections also account for the overwhelming number of duties and stimuli that an officer must process, for, as he says later, "In combat, your mind is *jammed*" (6, 39). Both in and out of combat, Marlantes reminds the reader of the burdens being carried around by an officer—in his case, including a girlfriend back in the States, Meg, to whom he says he wrote for years even after she sent him a Dear John letter while he was in Vietnam. Perhaps Jimmy Cross's thoughts about Martha are not so unusual?

Marlantes and LT Cross also share a common trait in that they both take part in one of Marlantes's "white heat atrocities" as a form of vengeance. In O'Brien's story Cross and his men burn the village of Than Ke as a way to exact some modicum of revenge for Lavender's death. (Students sometimes seem unsure if Cross is too soft as a leader or an amoral monster when they get to the burning of Than Ke.) Likewise, when one of his best fighters, a popular if eccentric young man nicknamed Canada, is killed, Marlantes and his platoon gain some revenge by entering into a no-quarter fight as they attack an enemy position in order to "get their pride back" after being beaten back earlier in the fight (99). Marlantes even struggles, as he tells the reader, with the story of this fight, wanting to take more blame (which also produces credit, of course) for killing the NVA as his men, like grieving Trojans, use their fallen champion as motivation to fight on. At this very O'Brien-like moment, Marlantes notes, he could gain a little

glory and also “wouldn’t have to admit that the killing that followed Canada’s death was far more of a personal moral failing than I wanted to admit.” Many of the same traits and actions that plebes find hard to tolerate in O’Brien’s LT Cross also exist in the very real form of LT Marlantes.

The aftermath of warfare also haunts both of these texts. On one side, there is heroism. O’Brien’s characters sometimes evince the same desire to do great things, as symbolized by medals, as LT Marlantes. In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin meditates at his observation post upon having almost won the Silver Star, partly for the status it conveys but also for its proof that human will has “the power to defeat fear” (81). “There was a Silver Star twinkling somewhere inside” this terrified young soldier. Berlin sounds quite akin to the younger version of himself that Marlantes describes. More tragically, of course, one thinks of O’Brien’s other almost-winner of the Silver Star, Norman Bowker in “Speaking of Courage”. Bowker, having returned home from Vietnam, finds himself embedded back in his hometown with no one to talk to, not even his father, whose baseball game on the radio he does not want to interrupt to tell war stories. (Paul Berlin also envisions showing the Silver Star to his father.) The experience of Bowker, who eventually hangs himself because he cannot overcome his experience, tragically parallels the experience that Marlantes offers of his own homecoming in the chapter “Home”. Met only by his immediate family but not truly celebrated, not given a chance to talk openly about his experiences, Marlantes enters the cone of silence that surrounds him for so much of his postwar experience in the memoir and will color his struggle to come to terms with his own deeds in Vietnam. Berlin and Bowker, as well as Marlantes himself, also offer an excellent opportunity to discuss Marlantes’s recommendation that rituals, even improvised one, and peer co-counseling within the armed forces are essential for neutralizing the hazardous psychological effects of

combat experiences. Perhaps, futile as it was, Jimmy Cross's burning of Martha's letters had a point.

## Marlantes and “The Pugilist at Rest”

Those seeking a short piece of war fiction that could be combined easily with Marlantes might do well to consider the work of Thom Jones, specifically the title story of his first collection, *The Pugilist at Rest*. The work has been fairly well anthologized, and conveniently it is also available to any student with access to the Nimitz web page. The story was first published in the December 2, 1991 issue of *The New Yorker*, and an electronic version can be opened, read, and downloaded for printing from the Nimitz electronic catalogue. Jones’s stories tend, like Raymond Carver’s or Annie Proulx’s, to have favorite topics. In the case of Jones, those favorite topics would be Marines, boxers, and janitors. Just as Carver’s down-and-out characters often offer an exploration of alcoholism or the meaning of trust in a relationship or the struggles of Proulx’s denizens of a fading west offer a sense of major environmental and socioeconomic challenges, Jones often focuses on the relevance of philosophy to everyday life and the nature of human contact with fields of experience that approach the transcendent. (Translation: many of his characters have temporal-lobe epilepsy, as Dostoevski did, or they have some other connection to an experience of the divine that may or may not be real.) Jones and Marlantes share a few concerns, then, first in thinking through how philosophical (or at least would-be philosophical) ideas can be brought to bear in making sense of the experience of combat, and second in exploring how the experience of ritual or transcendence (the latter also a concern of O’Brien’s) influences our understanding of warfare.

Jones is both a former Marine and a former amateur boxer, so he comes by his obsessions naturally. He trained to be a recon Marine, but he was discharged in 1973 before he would have been sent to Vietnam. He also suffers from epilepsy, so he knows his material in detail. As is the case with O’Brien, however, one will run into trouble with the nature of truth. In the case of

Jones, this problem is related more to the basic difficulty of making clear to one's students that Jones did not, in fact, do any of the things that the protagonists of his war stories describe in Vietnam. In this very basic regard, some of Marlantes's concerns with the nature of lying in warfare, especially as it relates to medals, are interesting, particularly because the narrator of "The Pugilist" takes credit for the combat deeds of his dead best friend and is awarded a Navy Cross. (This produces an issue with the author, too, as one occasionally has to drive home that Jones isn't confessing to fraud in this story because he never went to Vietnam.)

The story is a complicated one, filled with the narrator's periodic digressions into his philosophical reading and the history of boxing. The story is told in the past tense by the narrator in a form that ultimately seems like a confession as he faces the possibility of experimental neurosurgery to resolve his epilepsy and the massive depression that accompanies it. The story is as much that of his combat buddy, Jorgeson, as his own. The story begins at boot camp in San Diego, where the narrator assaults and gravely injures another recruit who has been hassling his much smaller friend, Jorgeson. Jorgeson, while a dynamic presence, has a sarcastic attitude toward the Marines that changes only when the two friends cross paths again later after boot camp and decide to join Force Recon. In their first fight, a jump into a hot landing zone, their unit is overwhelmed, but Jorgeson kills a remarkable number of the enemy before the narrator, the sole survivor, calls in an air strike and lies in his after-action report, taking credit for Jorgeson's heroism and being awarded a Navy Cross. Later in his career, washed-up and a functional alcoholic at twenty-seven, the narrator fights a heavier boxer at Camp Pendleton and takes such a severe beating that he wakes up with brain damage that induces his epilepsy. (We are led to believe that he took the beating at least in part out of guilt.)

Much of the narrative's contemporary "action" is no action at all, but rather consists of the narrator recalling how his attitudes toward life, and especially violence, have changed. The earlier parts of the story link up brilliantly with Marlantes. The narrator recalls with pride the transition from recruits to Marines that he and his platoon made in boot camp, much as Marlantes recalls those moments with pride. Jorgeson's mad act of heroism recalls much of what Marlantes says about heroism in his chapter on the subject and the death of Vancouver as described in Marlantes's memoir, among other heroic deeds. The narrator's description of their first firefight recalls Marlantes's comment about the mind being overrun in combat. Perhaps the most useful moments, however, occur after the first firefight. The narrator becomes a serial perpetrator of white heat atrocities in his desire to avenge his friend and his unit over the course of three tours: "There was a reservoir of malice, poison, and vicious sadism in my soul ... I wanted some payback for Jorgeson ... I grieved for myself and what I had lost. I committed unspeakable crimes and got medals for it" (19-20). The nature of the narrator's suffering at this point, to say nothing of the self-destructive mindset in which he finds himself when he rotates back to Pendleton, recalls strongly Marlantes's thoughts about the trauma of combat and his belief that more rituals to process death should be part of our military culture.

Perhaps most interesting, however, would be a discussion of the chapter on killing. Jones's narrator says that his epilepsy changed him: "I wondered what had made me act the way I had acted. Why had I killed my fellowmen in war, without any feeling, remorse, or regret? ... Why did I like to dish out pain ...?" (21-2). This meditation, which even includes considerations of whether violence is inherent in humans and if it is a gendered behavior, recalls many of Marlantes's own speculations. It can often be a particularly challenging moment in discussion, because even the narrator admits that this wisdom that comes with age may be nothing but his

disease. “You lose your health and you start thinking this way,” he says (22). Marlantes’s continued belief that killing can be necessary and his belief that killing in war requires no apology obviously does not mesh with the pugilist’s increasing regret and guilt, but the great weariness that pervades the Jones story might be well matched with Marlantes’s statement that the single greatest feeling he experiences in reflecting on killing during the Vietnam war is a profound, tragic sadness. The narrator, from his youthful confidence to his desire for revenge for Jorgeson (not so very different from Marlantes’s desire to avenge Vancouver) to his experience of regret later in life, covers the full emotional and psychological spectrum of Marlantes’s own experience, and his dips into philosophy seem to have yielded him some of the same ideas.

### **Athens and America: Marlantes and Sophocles**

As one might perhaps expect, Marlantes can at times be obsessed with the classical period. He refers to combat as a sacred space, the Temple of Mars. In describing the fundamental (and fundamentally male, in his mind) principles of a warrior's life, he cites a description by Odysseus in *The Odyssey* (235-6). The murderous anger that he regularly describes coming upon him recalls nothing so much as the madness of Ajax at Troy. Perhaps most importantly, however, he frames the cynicism and facility with lying that one falls into all too easily in a combat environment through the experience of Odysseus and Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. The combined experiences of Odysseus, the wily veteran and cynical master of controlled lying, and Neoptolemus, the *ephebe* (beginner) frame the complicated relationship between leadership and morality and truth in warfare.

It should be noted before we consider *Philoctetes* that a more limited but also productive reading of *Ajax* is possible alongside Marlantes. Given the ease with which these two plays pair up, as witnessed by the *Theatres of War* Brady event, this should come as no surprise. Ajax, cheated out of the arms of Achilles at the funeral contest, is consumed by a murderous rage at the Greek commanders. Only the intervention of Athena saves the Greek generals as she visits madness on Ajax and leads him to kill the army's store of sheep and goats. The sense of having been wronged, however, is very real and no trick of the gods. Ajax is especially furious with Odysseus, experiencing an anger at the accomplished liar not unlike the experience Marlantes has in the first chapter of murderous rage. Angry at those cheering his unit like the crowd at a football game, at the chaplain who brings him whiskey and dirty jokes, and at the civilians crowding the bar on his R&R, young Marlantes has a bit of Ajax in him. Perhaps it is this bit that leads to his concern in the book's closing chapters with peer co-counseling, which arrives too

late for Ajax when his war-bride, Tecmessa pleads with Ajax's troops to speak with their despondent commander since "Men in such a state can be talked into sense by friends" (345).

Ajax's initial anger over the insult he receives is, at its core, anger with mendacity. Odysseus receives the arms of Achilles as the greatest of the Greek warriors, which the mighty Ajax furiously denies. Truth be told, he is cheated. Marlantes, however, chooses to focus not on the man infuriated by lies—though he and other men in his memoir spend lots of time being infuriated by them—but on the master of lying. Tasked with retrieving Philoctetes' bow from the island where the Greeks have stranded him owing to his festering mystical snakebite, Odysseus and Neoptolemus must join forces. Odysseus is, however, the main agent of the plot for Marlantes, which is especially interesting since his "strategy is basically to lie about everything," including telling "a bold lie" to Philoctetes at the end of the play, about which Marlantes does not elaborate (120, 121). Marlantes goes on to describe how the lie can be a powerful weapon and also a powerful tool for conditioning oneself to the intolerable conditions of warfare.

The unusual valor of Odysseus as a man with a suitably flexible relationship to the truth, what Marlantes calls an ability to know when it is important to lie (120), strikes an odd note, but it is one well worth considering. Marlantes seems prone to mostly pointing out when authority can lie for the good in overlooking human failure. His first great example is when he declares that the marijuana cigarette one of his enlisted, a short-timer and an African-American, to be tobacco in order to spare the young man the lifetime of misery that could await him for being charged with marijuana consumption. For Odysseus, the stakes are generally rather higher, and even his presentation of the power of rhetoric operates on a grander scale than this small lie told by LT Marlantes. He declares that men are mastered not by deeds, but by words, whether the ones used to describe them or the ones they speak (99). Given how very little time Marlantes

dedicates to the question of inspirational speech, or even inspirational leadership more broadly imagined, in the book *Odysseus* is an odd character. Perhaps the connection between the two texts comes at the end of the play as Odysseus refuses to be shamed for his use of falsehood and deception, declaring “I am whatever kind of man I have to be” in order to achieve the greater goal of the Greek army, a sentiment echoed by the final chorus praising Odysseus for this deed. Perhaps this is the lesson that the ephebic Marlantes has to learn about truth and lying, as well.

The bond formed by Neoptolemus and Philoctetes also speaks to some of Marlantes’s ideas about brotherhood and suffering. Marlantes reads Philoctetes’ snakebite as a metaphor for consciousness, an unwillingness to press forward with the ridiculous war for Helen, noting that having someone in a group with a different consciousness can be disturbing and often leads to the ostracism of that person. The relevance of this condition to a returning veteran need not be elaborated on too much here, especially for anyone who was present for the *Theatres of War* performance. Certainly it seems right on the surface for Marlantes. The conditions in which Neoptolemus must operate, without his father and adrift in a world of grown men who must bring him into the adult society of warriors, are much like those Marlantes describes in his chapter “The Club,” where he recalls being lost with a group of Cub Scouts on a campout. When the boys find their way back to camp in the dark, they are implicitly rewarded by the grown men with them, who let them sit at the campfire while they tell war stories. The young Marlantes even speaks up, saying that his father had been part of the “Red Ball Express” supplying Patton’s tanks, a record that the young boy has always seen as inglorious, but when the other men praise his father for the valor needed to perform this dangerous task, little Karl perks up and sees his father and himself in a new light. The ephebic young officer and the small boy without his father are, perhaps, not so different. It comes as no surprise, then, that the young man and the exile

bond over their honor for the dead Achilles and the other noble men the Greeks have lost, and also over recounted tales of suffering. Neoptolemus receives not only a lesson in truth and lying, but also a seat at the scouting campfire, so to speak. Philoctetes offers him the gateway into the world of grown men that he so desperately needs, and Neoptolemus in return offers what amounts to peer co-counseling—the forte of Marlantes’s Gunny Mike—to the traumatized exile. Thus do young and old men alike grope their way through not only the sacred Temple of Mars, but also the very mundane and often painful world that exists outside of it.