

# Leaders Are Readers

Why reading is the most important tool in your arsenal

By Sharon McBride, USAFAS Public Affairs Officer

Reading? Who has time to read? In a day and age where we are inundated with information, you might be thinking I really don't have time to read. I hear you. It's tough to pick up a book after a long day. Many of us (myself included) would rather zone out and watch a favorite program on Hulu.

However, as a professional in the Field Artillery you are expected to read, not just social media posts or emails, but books. Books? Yes, books, and other professional publications whether they are daily, weekly, or monthly.

"As a Redleg professional you are expected to be multi-faceted and adaptable," explains BG Stephen G. Smith, the 53rd Commandant of the U.S. Army Field Artillery School and Chief of the Field Artillery Branch. "You also must be focused and have the mental stamina that is necessary for us to win on any battlefield, on any continent and in any type of conflict. We must fight and win against a peer threat in large scale combat operations. Our Nation has a tradition of fighting large scale wars with Fires...we will remain ready to do so when called upon."

So how do we win? It starts with critical thinking, sound decision making and most importantly, unparalleled leadership skills. While this list of skills isn't all inclusive, it does exemplify how to "Engage your brain before you engage your trigger," as stated by Secretary of Defense, James 'Mad Dog' Mattis.

In a blog post from 2013, the year Mattis retired, military historian Jill Russell shared a 2003 email, with his permission, that Mattis had written and which had been widely circulated within the Marine Corps. A colleague had asked why it is important for officers to take time to read and study.<sup>1</sup>

Mattis wrote that "the problem with being too busy to read is that you learn by experience (or by

1 Jena McGregor, "The avid reading habits of Trump's Secretary of Defense, James 'Mad Dog' Mattis, www.washingtonpost.com, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2016/11/23/the-avid-reading-habits-of-trumps-potential-secretary-of-defense-james-mad-dog-mattis/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.6fbc1852884f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2016/11/23/the-avid-reading-habits-of-trumps-potential-secretary-of-defense-james-mad-dog-mattis/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6fbc1852884f) (August 28, 2018)



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your men's experience), i.e. the hard way. By reading, you learn through others' experiences, generally a better way to do business, especially in our line of work where the consequences of incompetence are so final for young men." His reading, he wrote, provides guidance and perspective. "It doesn't give me all the answers, but it lights what is often a dark path ahead."<sup>2</sup>

So do you still think you have no time for additional reading?

"If you're one of those people who claim you don't have time to read I encourage you to make time," said BG Smith. "Time never 'appears' for anything; you have to make it. As a professional of our branch you are expected to not only demonstrate the skills listed above, but to also communicate and write effectively."

Everything you read—good or bad—helps to inform your writing and therefore how you communicate. This alone is enough of a reason to keep reading.<sup>3</sup>

2 McGregor, "The avid reading habits of Trump's Secretary of Defense, James 'Mad Dog' Mattis

3 Kenna Griffin, "Why You Should Read Every Day," <http://www.ProfKRG.com>, <http://www.profkr.com/why-you-should-read-every->

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Nevertheless, knowing and doing are not the same; becoming an effective reader does require discipline. In his book, “The Leader’s Bookshelf,” Admiral James Stavridis provides some tools and ideas of developing a reading habit and getting the most from what you read.

General Gordon Sullivan, former Chief of Staff of the Army, agrees it is essential to form a reading habit.

“Books are an important part of any U.S. Army leader’s professional development. There is never enough time to do all the reading we want to do, but I learned early in my career that I could make some time for reading. By doing so, I was able to find relaxation in the midst of challenging assignments, prepare myself to master that day’s challenge, and educate myself for the bigger problems hidden in the future.”<sup>4</sup>

“My point is: Read to relax, to learn, and to expand your horizons,” states General Sullivan. “You will be better for it as you will grow personally and professionally.”<sup>5</sup>

day, (August 28, 2018)

<sup>4</sup> “American Generalship, Character is Everything: The Art of Command,” Edgar F. Puryear Jr., 2000, www.presidiopress.com, ISBN 978-0-89141-770-5

<sup>5</sup> Puryear, “American Generalship”

General W. L. Creech, U.S. Air force (Ret.) is another example of a successful leader who is an avid reader. General Creech had a rapid rise to four stars and had a lasting impact on the management style and combat capabilities of the Air Force.<sup>6</sup>

He credits his success for having the discipline to read.

“The best intellectual growth comes from being a consummate, ever voracious reader of books of all kinds. Of course, with long duty hours and long TDYs, that’s not easy. You must develop the discipline to make yourself read a book a week, or least a book every two weeks.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>

It’s a fact, those who read tend to have a more varied range of words to express how they feel and to get their point across. This increases exponentially with the volumes that are consumed, giving you a higher level of vocabulary to use in everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

As a young reporter I asked a more-seasoned reporter how I could improve my writing. Her response? Read good writing. She advised me to really study the sentence structure and how authors combine words. Just like a great baker chooses the freshest apples and best spices to bake a pie, a good writer or communicator chooses the best words to get their point across.

At its core, communication is about expressing yourself so that the things you think and the things you say (or write) are closely aligned. Communication is the keystone of effective leadership.

So now you know how reading can help you become an effective communicator, but how does it factor into learning how to be a critical thinker?

<sup>6</sup> Puryear, “American Generalship”

<sup>7</sup> Puryear, “American Generalship”

<sup>8</sup> “10 Reasons Why Reading Books Will Save Your Life” Whytoread.com, <http://whytoread.com/why-to-read-10-reasons-why-reading-books-will-save-your-life/>, (August 28, 2018)

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Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, who are the 2nd and 4th richest people in the world, have credited reading as key to their success. Gates, who amassed a \$92bn (£68bn) fortune largely from Microsoft which he cofounded in 1975. Gates reads for at least an hour every night and gets through books at the rate of one a week.

<sup>9</sup>

Zuckerberg, who is an avid reader as well, has credited his reading habit into helping him become a better critical thinker.

Reading is an active mental process, which often replaces a passive activity like watching TV. People who read have higher GPAs, higher intelligence, a more diverse vocabulary, and greater general knowledge than those who don't.<sup>10</sup> Simply, reading gives you tools in your analytical toolbox. It helps make you a better thinker.<sup>11</sup> What most people don't realize is that analytical skills are not ones that can be taught in a classroom, they are taught by actually working problems in real life.

If you worry that your analytical skills are not up to par, never fear. They can be developed with time and consistent practice. Like a muscle, the more you use it, the stronger it gets. One way to start is to read more books. This may sound a little too simple of a solution, but it really works.<sup>12</sup>

How does it work? Well, it helps when you read as actively as possible. Instead of passively skimming over paragraphs and grazing the pages, try to look at both sides of the story. For example, if you are reading a novel, try to see the plot from the perspective of the hero, the villain and other supporting characters. This causes your brain to think in new ways, and increase your stimulation. Thinking differently helps to expand

<sup>9</sup> Griffin, "Why You Should Read Every Day"

<sup>10</sup> Griffin, "Why You Should Read Every Day"

<sup>11</sup> "10 Reasons Why Reading Books Will Save Your Life," Whytoread.com

<sup>12</sup> Katrina Manning, "Analytical Thinking: Why You Need It And How to Get Better," <https://blog.udemy.com>, <https://blog.udemy.com/analytical-thinking/>, (August 29, 2018)



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your mind, which is critical.<sup>13</sup>

Besides being a critical thinker, you also want your Soldiers to trust that you will make the most well-informed and correct decisions. So how does reading generate a great decision maker?

When you read a book, you are actually gaining the knowledge, perspective and experience of someone else. This can hasten your success as you need not to repeat their mistakes while focusing on achieving a goal. Books are like a mountain of gems which contain people's successes, failures and advice. Life is too short for you to repeat the mistakes of others people in order for you attain results that someone might already have reached.<sup>14</sup>

This opinion is one that is also shared by the Secretary of Defense Mattis.

"Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flat-footed by any situation, never at a loss for how any problem has been addressed before," Mattis wrote in a 2003 email to military historian Jill Russell.

"A real understanding of history means that we

<sup>13</sup> Manning, "Analytical Thinking: Why You Need It And How to Get Better"

<sup>14</sup> JJ Wong, "8 reasons why reading is so important," Inspiration Boost, <http://www.inspirationboost.com/8-reasons-why-reading-is-so-important> (August 28, 2018)

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face NOTHING new under the sun,” Mattis wrote. “We have been fighting on this planet for 5,000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. Winging it and filling body bags as we sort out what works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of incompetence in our profession.” <sup>15</sup>

General Schwarzkopf also credits reading in having a pivotal role in his leadership.

“You either learn from history or you are doomed to repeat it. I became very interested in military history at West Point.” <sup>16</sup>

Finally, how does a reading habit help to create unparalleled leadership skills?

Leadership skills are something that you hear a lot about in the abstract; yet you may find you’re at a loss to define what the term really means. In the broadest sense, leadership skills can be nearly anything that enables you to lead others effectively. While some skills will vary based on your industry, there are several that are universal across nearly every work en-

vironment.<sup>17</sup> These are motivation, problem solving, professionalism, communication, technical skills, and innovation.<sup>18</sup> Does any of this sound familiar?

Leadership skills are important for many reasons. They position you to act as an effective leader and problem-solver in so many situations. Work on honing these skills by reading and watch how they can impact your job performance and opportunities. <sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, reading should be the most important tool in your arsenal.

“I can’t tell you the number of times I looked down at what was going on the ground or I was engaged in a fight somewhere and I knew within a couple of minutes how I was going to screw up the enemy. And I knew it because I’d done so much reading. I knew what I was going to do because I’d seen other similar situations in the reading. I knew how they’d been dealt with successfully or unsuccessfully.”<sup>20</sup>

17 “What are management skills and why are they important? Career-Builder.com, <https://www.careerbuilder.com/advice/what-are-management-skills-and-why-are-they-important> (August 29, 2018)

18 “What are management skills and why are they important? Career-Builder.com

19 “What are management skills and why are they important? Career-Builder.com

20 McGregor, “The avid reading habits of Trump’s Secretary of Defense, James ‘Mad Dog’ Mattis”

15 McGregor, “The avid reading habits of Trump’s Secretary of Defense, James ‘Mad Dog’ Mattis”

16 Puryear, “American Generalship”

## What should I read?

Click on the icons below to go to respective reading lists located on the web



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Chiefs of Staff  
Reading List**



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of Defense  
Reading List**



**Army Chief of Staff  
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