

## Book Review

### Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major Angel M. Overgaard\*

[T]he commander was the link to order and civility, and he had to be humane. At the same time he had to be uncompromising to protect the lives of all. The job was not easy.<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Introduction

*Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat* is exactly what the title describes, a first-hand account of an American platoon leader's experiences in combat in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> The book elucidates a new leader's challenges in trying to establish and follow a leadership strategy amid the fog of war. The author, James McDonough, is a retired Army Colonel documenting his first assignment in the U.S. Army after graduating from West Point and completing his infantry officer training.<sup>4</sup> McDonough's expertly crafted prose succinctly conveys a litany of key leadership concepts.<sup>5</sup> His striking honesty in revealing his loneliness, mistakes, and insecurities, as well as his journey to self-confidence enable a deep understanding of the endless challenges of a platoon leader in combat.

McDonough's experiences and lessons in leadership are useful and relevant in today's Army.<sup>6</sup> Through his leadership strategy, McDonough strives to create a moral, adaptable, and agile force.<sup>7</sup> This coincides with military leadership expectations spelled out in current Army doctrine.<sup>8</sup> McDonough, however, does not argue that he is a good leader and does not force doctrine or lessons on the reader. Instead, he effectively reveals his strategy and journey to establishing

trust with his Soldiers<sup>9</sup> through thrilling war stories and personal analysis. The reader is left to glean lessons from McDonough's successes, failures, and the decisions that fall somewhere in between.

All new military leaders should read *Platoon Leader*, but they should treat it as a teaching tool and not as a field manual. Although McDonough makes mistakes (as all leaders do) in every attribute and competency of leadership, he is nonetheless a good leader.<sup>10</sup> By acknowledging his mistakes, he creates invaluable discussion points for the classroom. The book is particularly valuable to judge advocates to remind them of the complexity of command decisions and the importance of ensuring that commanders understand relevant law.<sup>11</sup> *Platoon Leader* also evokes thought and discussion on morality and the laws of war and how they coincide and diverge. Finally, the book is a fascinating account of the Vietnam War from a Soldier in combat and thus, a stimulating read for any Soldier or civilian interested in that subject.

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<sup>1</sup> JAMES R. McDONOUGH, *PLATOON LEADER: A MEMOIR OF COMMAND IN COMBAT* (Presidio Press 2003) (1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 78.

<sup>3</sup> The author writes, "Since this book is neither an adventure yarn nor a definitive description of the war in Vietnam, one might ask, What is its purpose? In response I can only suggest that the book is about an American platoon leader in combat." *Id.* at 1.

<sup>4</sup> See *id.* inside back cover (containing McDonough's biography); see also *id.* at 12-13 (discussing his "road to war").

<sup>5</sup> Leadership concepts in *Platoon Leader* include how a leader can quickly and effectively establish his role, have unity of command with his senior non-commissioned officer (NCO), apply training to combat, have discipline in all things, efficiently institute continuous training, face the tactical challenges of warfare with an intelligent and unpredictable enemy, preserve morality, and understand the humanity of the Soldiers answering the call of duty. See generally *id.*

<sup>6</sup> The mission of the Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course "is to educate, train, and inspire Infantry Lieutenants so that upon IBOLC graduation, they demonstrate the competence, confidence, physical and mental toughness, and moral/ethical fiber necessary to lead platoons in any operational environment." *Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course Mission Statement*, U.S. ARMY MANEUVER CTR. OF EXCELLENCE, [http://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/199th/ibolc/content/pdf/IBOLC\\_Mission\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/199th/ibolc/content/pdf/IBOLC_Mission_Statement.pdf) (last

visited Sept. 5, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> See generally U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE PUB. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP (1 Aug. 2012) (C1, 10 Sept. 2012) [hereinafter ADP 6-22] (establishing leadership principles that apply to all Soldiers and Army Civilians).

<sup>8</sup> While serving as Chief of Staff of the Army, General Odierno enumerated the following leadership expectations: "Have a vision and lead change"; "Be your formation's moral and ethical compass"; "Learn, think, adapt"; "Balance risk and opportunity to retain the initiative"; "Build agile, effective, high-performing teams"; "Empower subordinates and underwrite risk"; "Develop bold, adaptive, and broadened leaders"; and "Communicate—up, down, and laterally; tell the whole story." General Raymond T. Odierno, *Foreword* to ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7.

<sup>9</sup> This review uses "Soldiers" to refer to all servicemembers and masculine references to represent both genders.

<sup>10</sup> Although there are numerous sources for leadership in the military, this statement relies on the Leadership Requirements Model. See ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7, paras. 22-38.

<sup>11</sup> See Geoffrey S. Corn, *Contemplating the True Nature of the Notion of "Responsibility" in Responsible Command*, INT'L REV. RED CROSS (Dec. 2015), <https://www.icrc.org/en/international-review/article/contemplating-true-nature-notion-responsibility-responsible-command> (arguing the importance of a commander's understanding and effective implementation of the law of armed conflict).

## II. Journey to Leadership<sup>12</sup>

McDonough spends six months as the leader of 2d Platoon, Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry Airborne, in the village of Truong Lam, in Tam Quon district, Binh Dinh province.<sup>13</sup> While Truong Lam is a symbol of the sustainability of South Vietnam's government,<sup>14</sup> it also may be the most Viet Cong-controlled locale in the country.<sup>15</sup> Family members of the Viet Cong have front row seats to the platoon's every move.<sup>16</sup> His unit's mission is to secure the village,<sup>17</sup> not a simple task given the circumstances.

As McDonough takes control of his platoon, he reveals the weight and loneliness of leadership: "I was alone. That was my first sensation as a leader."<sup>18</sup> Loneliness is a byproduct of perhaps the most important lesson of *Platoon Leader*: A leader is responsible for his men. McDonough has his radio to call for air support, ground reinforcements, or medical evacuations, but he is the commander on the ground responsible for the lives of all his Soldiers. He is best positioned to assess the options to make the best tactical decisions. McDonough quickly grasps that he has no choice but to become the leader his men need:

I might describe myself as "along for the ride," but whatever happened here or back at the perimeter I would have to account for—to my superiors, to my men, and to myself. I felt I was living a lie: I was trying desperately to learn what I was already supposed to know.<sup>19</sup>

Junior leaders should note how efficiently McDonough establishes and institutes his vision for his men.<sup>20</sup> Within hours of taking command, McDonough determines his style

of leadership and meets with his key subordinates.<sup>21</sup> He bases his tactical goals on the Army's strategic goal to "control the countryside"<sup>22</sup> and his need to learn and establish leadership from the most beneficial position.<sup>23</sup> When McDonough gives his first order, he is very conscious of his words and tone, demonstrating the importance of first impressions and attention to detail in honing leadership skills.<sup>24</sup> All the while, McDonough is conscious of his inexperience but shows resilience and presses forward with decisive action and in so doing, builds confidence.<sup>25</sup>

McDonough reveals another major and ongoing challenge for the new tactical leader: taking all the Army's training and effectively applying it to combat.<sup>26</sup> Implementation requires a quick assessment of a leader's men, the enemy, and the terrain and stresses the importance of having the technical skills down from day one. Most leaders will have and need substantially more time to determine and effect their vision.

Because he has the knowledge and tactical proficiency, however, McDonough can immediately begin training and critiquing his men as they perform their duties.<sup>27</sup> He focuses on tactics and discipline, ensuring that his men have the detailed knowledge required to assist in minimizing their casualties and maximizing casualties to the enemy.<sup>28</sup> McDonough's competent example is useful in learning not only how to "[b]uild agile, effective, high-performing teams"<sup>29</sup> but how to establish authority over more combat-experienced men.<sup>30</sup> This is an important lesson for new leaders as many of their Soldiers will have experienced multiple deployments.

Junior leaders also need to understand the importance of their relationships with the non-commissioned officers (NCO) in their commands. McDonough empowers his NCO

<sup>12</sup> "Leader development is achieved through the life-long synthesis of knowledge, skills, and experiences gained through the training and education opportunities in the institutional, operational, and self-development domains." U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, REG. 350-1, ARMY TRAINING AND LEADER DEVELOPMENT para. 1-10(a)(2) (19 Aug. 2014).

<sup>13</sup> MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 28, 30. Before the title page is a useful map of the 2d Platoon's position aside the village of Truong Lam, in Tam Quon district, Binh Dinh province. *See id.* *illus.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 89.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 30. Truong Lam's divided purpose provides no reprieve to the villagers. *See id.* at 237-39.

<sup>16</sup> *See id.* at 29. "Modern wars, particularly the Vietnam War, draw little distinction between battlefields and civilian communities. The callousness of war that infects soldiers was every bit as evident in the peasant population in the village where my platoon worked. The peasants were the families of the Viet Cong." *Id.* at 78.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 47.

<sup>20</sup> *See* ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7, para. 3 ("Leadership is the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.").

<sup>21</sup> He determines that "[he] would communicate [his] style of leadership through [his] tactical instruction." MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> Until he establishes his leadership, he determines that he will go out on every other patrol as he is more effective leading from inside the perimeter where the majority of his men are located. *Id.* at 38-41.

<sup>24</sup> *See id.* at 41. "Everyone was wondering what the new lieutenant would be like, and I would be telling them with my first words, my gestures, my demeanor, my eyes. . . . If I began with a blunder, my credibility would be shot, and so might some of my men." *Id.* at 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> *See id.* at 41.

<sup>26</sup> *See id.* at 27.

<sup>27</sup> *See id.* at 48-49. "Unit training and leader development are inextricably linked. Good training supports leader development and good leaders develop good training programs for their subordinates." General Raymond T. Odierno, *Foreword* to U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE PUB. 7-0, TRAINING UNITS AND DEVELOPING LEADERS, FOREWORD (23 Aug. 2012).

<sup>28</sup> MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 73.

<sup>29</sup> General Raymond T. Odierno, *Foreword* to ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7.

<sup>30</sup> *See* MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 48-49.

leadership, discussing the importance of unity of command.<sup>31</sup> He also discusses the blurred lines between the platoon leader and sergeant, which cause friction.<sup>32</sup> Junior officers and NCOs would benefit from further discussing this topic to learn from each other and effectively communicate expected roles. McDonough shows the necessity of effectively utilizing his NCOs to complete all checks and to ensure discipline in all things.<sup>33</sup> He recognizes that discipline is necessary not only to keep Soldiers alive, but to allow them to maintain their civility.<sup>34</sup>

Leaders must always remember that Soldiers are human. This fact can be easy to forget when surviving in inhumane conditions where death is commonplace. Soldiers have homes, families, and personal goals. Through revealing personalities and stories of his Soldiers, McDonough garners respect for those who serve, while at the same time conveys important leadership lessons. He shows why a good leader must listen to and get to know his men.<sup>35</sup> This assists in not only creating an open and cohesive work environment, but it also allows leaders to learn Soldiers' strengths and weaknesses.

McDonough also demonstrates the importance of clear, consistent, and impartial leadership, which was particularly necessary for 2d Platoon. According to McDonough, "Only those without skill, without schooling, and without friends . . . made it to the field."<sup>36</sup> There are Soldiers who require more time and energy than all others combined, but discipline and unit cohesion are great combatants to complacency and crime. In most cases, McDonough quickly and effectively remedies misconduct.<sup>37</sup> There were a few situations, however, that McDonough should have handled differently. For example, King, an incoming Soldier with a drug and attitude problem, fires a 40-millimeter round just past McDonough's ear, threatening his life and authority.<sup>38</sup> As McDonough tells it,

I had to do more than keep them alive. I had to preserve their human dignity. I was making them kill, forcing them to commit the most uncivilized of acts, but at the same time I had to keep them civilized. That was my duty as their leader. . . . War gives the appearance of condoning almost everything, but men must live with their actions for a long time afterward. A leader had to help them understand that there are lines they must not cross. He is their link to normalcy, to order, to humanity.

*Id.* at 77-78.

<sup>35</sup> *See id.* at 75-76. "Leaders must balance successful mission accomplishment with how they treat and care for organizational members. Taking care of people involves creating and sustaining a positive climate through open communications, trust, cohesion, and teamwork." ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7, para. 6.

he calmly switches his M-16 to fire, places the muzzle under his Soldier's chin and threatens to "blow [his] brains to kingdom come."<sup>39</sup>

No matter how tactically necessary his actions seem given the exigencies of war, most Judge Advocates would see McDonough's action as a Uniform Code of Military Justice violation. McDonough, however, sees this incident as a turning point in his leadership. He notes, "[King] had given me a clear chance to establish my authority over the platoon once and for all, and from that point on I would never fear any of my men. The experience gave me the self-confidence to take the platoon through whatever might come."<sup>40</sup> Importantly, this scenario stimulates discussion on what other actions a platoon leader could take under difficult circumstances to survive and continue the mission.<sup>41</sup>

### III. Morality in Leadership

McDonough wholeheartedly takes on the role of his platoon's "moral and ethical compass."<sup>42</sup> McDonough makes mistakes in this role; however, already by his third patrol, McDonough shows he is fit to lead men. Because he does not perceive imminent danger, he stops his squad before they shoot a man and young boy who the squad leader determined were lawful Viet Cong targets.<sup>43</sup> McDonough recounts, "If I relinquished my command, the squad would open fire; both man and boy were as good as dead. Maybe [the squad leader] was right. . . . If I let him give the orders, the consequences were his. If I gave the orders, they were mine."<sup>44</sup>

His courage is an important example to junior leaders. McDonough's decision not only establishes his standing in the platoon but institutes his restricted rules of engagement. Instead of killing whenever legally justified, his platoon conducts an instantaneous risk assessment, balancing danger

<sup>31</sup> "[I]n battle there is nothing more important than unity of command . . ." *Id.* at 119.

<sup>32</sup> *See id.*

<sup>33</sup> *See id.* at 74. "For instance, health habits had to be inspected as diligently as weapons were." *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 77.

<sup>36</sup> MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 79.

<sup>37</sup> "[L]eaders will face—and have to overcome—fear, danger, and physical and moral adversity while caring for those they lead and protecting the organization entrusted to them." ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7, para. 13.

<sup>38</sup> MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 93.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 94.

<sup>41</sup> Other instances that merit more discussion are when McDonough suspects two of his subordinates of war crimes, and instead of reporting his suspicions to his chain of command, he transfers the Soldiers to other units. *Id.* at 154, 200-01.

<sup>42</sup> General Raymond T. Odierno, *Foreword* to ADP 6-22, *supra* note 7.

<sup>43</sup> MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 52. Under the prior ineffective platoon leader, the squad leader had become, in essence, the acting platoon leader, but McDonough asserts his leadership to take the burden.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 53. McDonough makes other tough calls to spare the villagers undue suffering. He stops Vietnamese Soldiers from beating suspected Viet Cong sympathizers that McDonough detained and had turned over to them. *Id.* at 143-44. McDonough also redirects an airstrike from hitting the village even though the pilots spot the enemy there. *Id.* at 108-09.

against the need to use lethal force. It is vital that McDonough establishes his position early on, so his men know the standard to make the tough calls. Later in combat, when McDonough falters, his men have the confidence and fortitude of well-trained leaders to bring him back into line.<sup>45</sup>

McDonough makes no specific mention of rules of engagement in *Platoon Leader* but reveals his knowledge of the Geneva Conventions in recounting his thought process during an engagement.<sup>46</sup> In an example where the balance weighs in the Soldiers' favor, McDonough threatens to kill a farmer unless he leads his squad through a heavily mined area.<sup>47</sup> McDonough acknowledges that "[he] had crossed a line" and that "the threat itself was criminal,"<sup>48</sup> but he determines that the lives of his men outweigh the risk to the civilian.

While making a strong case for establishing a line for his subordinates, McDonough makes compromises. Arguably, since McDonough takes ownership of his actions and orders, he protects his men from any adverse impact. He focuses on preserving human life, not a "rigid" reading of the laws of war, observing:

I was hardened to my task, yet I knew there were points at which to draw the line. Determining those points was my responsibility, and it weighed heavily on me.

It was not a simple matter of kill or be killed. I had to think of my men. I could not let them be killed because of a rigid morality on my part. But if I compromised with that morality too often, I would become little more than a war criminal, unfit to lead those men. I had to struggle to keep a sense of balance.<sup>49</sup>

Most judge advocates would recommend a more rigid adherence to the laws of war, but McDonough justifies his actions. At least in the book, McDonough's balancing test seems to save more Vietnamese and American lives than it costs. At times, he crosses the line, and at times, he makes the rules of engagement more restrictive. McDonough notes the dangerousness of being the arbitrator of the laws of war,<sup>50</sup> but his balancing test and result evoke useful fodder for

discussing morality and the laws of war.

#### IV. Conclusion

*Platoon Leader* is a fast-paced, succinct read that manages to integrate humanity and emotion into a hands-on guide for junior leaders. Through successes and failures, moral triumphs and follies, McDonough guides the junior leader through difficult leadership tasks. Although McDonough's exact recipe for asserting leadership and gaining trust will not work for all Soldiers (e.g., deploying to an extremely volatile area, getting blown up,<sup>51</sup> holding an M-16 to a subordinate's head), *Platoon Leader* provides numerous learning points that demand its studied review.

All new military leaders should read *Platoon Leader*; it allows for review and evaluation of a successful leader's actions. The book effectively illustrates leadership in combat at the tactical level and also raises several questions about morality in leadership. Because of the war story format, *Platoon Leader* is a great read for any Soldier to relate to or civilian to learn from. For judge advocates, *Platoon Leader* is valuable not only as a lesson in leadership, but assists in issue-spotting to prepare commanders for battle. In particular, McDonough's memoir highlights the military's need to ensure all leaders understand the laws of war because there will not always be another leader or judge advocate available to consult.

<sup>45</sup> His platoon sergeant stops McDonough from beating a prisoner of war (POW) to death after the POW tries to kill him. *Id.* at 132. Another Soldier reminds him that the Viet Cong are Soldiers too when McDonough is on the verge of letting his anger get the best of him with another POW. *Id.* at 199.

<sup>46</sup> McDonough shows a sophisticated understanding of the laws of war. Whether he had the understanding as a lieutenant or developed it in the years between Vietnam and writing the book is unknown.

<sup>47</sup> MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 173-74. McDonough often enlists the help of civilians in locating booby traps as the villagers frequently navigate the area. *See id.* at 172.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 174.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 178. McDonough is discussing the moral qualms he had when

disrupting enemy signaling at a Buddhist temple and pagoda. *See id.* at 177-78.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 174. McDonough admits, "A leader who arbitrates when the laws of land warfare are overtaken by pragmatic concerns is treading on dangerous ground. . . . But the consequences of my decisions were immediate, and I could not afford the comfort of a philosophical debate on the issues." *Id.* at 173. McDonough was surely referencing the "authoritative guidance to military personnel" in Field Manual 27-10. U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 27-10, THE LAW OF LAND WARFARE (18 Jul. 1956).

<sup>51</sup> During his third mission, a booby trap injures McDonough, an event which he believes helps establish his toughness in his men's eyes. MCDONOUGH, *supra* note 1, at 54, 70.