A Conversation with Karl Marlantes

Part 1 of 5: The Bestselling Author on the Battle to Get His Books Published and the Danger of Silence

Last year, Karl Marlantes delivered a bombshell to the publishing world in the form of Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War, a 600-page novel about an infantry officer serving in Vietnam.

Inspired by his own service in the war, Marlantes struggled for more than 37 years to complete Matterhorn. Upon its release, the novel quickly became a New York Times bestseller and garnered critical accolades and awards for the author.

But hidden in the struggle of getting Matterhorn to print is the story of another book, What It Is Like to Go to War. Marlantes wrote his second book both as a means to get Matterhorn published and as a way to come to grips with the demons of the war which haunted him.

A work of non-fiction, What It Is Like to Go to War was written as Marlantes had settled into life as a business leader and family man. Yet beneath this tranquil, seemingly normal life was the wreckage of a former Marine officer who was battered by his war experience.

What It Is Like to Go to War draws on the wisdom of ancient texts on combat, as well as enlightening conversations with friends, fellow veterans and, in particular, mythology scholar and author Joseph Campbell, who brings Marlantes to tears with a piece of long-forgotten wisdom.
Marlantes recently sat down with the DAV to discuss his most recent published work.

DAV: Can you tell me about the timing of writing Matterhorn and What It is Like to Go to War? Did you start writing one before the other or did you always intend to write both?

Marlantes: I started working on Matterhorn extremely early. I started writing it in the ‘70s and I couldn’t get anyone to touch it or to read the manuscript. So about the end of the ‘80s some of my friends, who are probably experts in the publishing industry, told me, “No wonder you can’t get a big fat fiction book published because no one knows your name or wants to take a gamble on an unknown name who writes a big fat fiction book. You need to write a non-fiction type of book.” That kind of put it in the back of my head. You get a non-fiction book published and then you get Matterhorn published. Quite frankly by 1990, I was cracking up with PTSD. I had no idea of what it was. But I started to get some hints of what was going on may have had something to do with the war. But I had never heard of PTSD.

I was overseas in Singapore. So I thought I should try to come to grips with some of the things that were bothering me. I was starting to have nightmares about certain things that had happened. That along with this thought that I should write a non-fiction book first led me to start working on What It Is Like to Go to War. And I basically started to work out some of my demons, and in the course of it I started to think that if I’m dealing with this then other guys must be dealing with it too. I also wished I would have known some of this stuff before I joined the Marine Corps, so I started thinking about young people going off to war to start a career. And finally came this idea that our culture is so bad about talking about combat. Veterans face isolation just by the fact that they have faced this situation. It’s like a mystic; they can’t even tell you what it was like because it was so different. But this silence we have for a combat veteran comes from fear. We
don’t want to embarrass him. From the veteran’s side, it’s, “I don’t want to say something because they may think I am a crazy killer.” We keep quiet. I didn’t know my father was in the Battle of the Bulge until I was 50 years old.

**DAV:** That is amazing.

**Marlantes:** Yeah, you know I didn’t even know it. He had some funny stories about getting drunk on Calvados in Normandy because that is acceptable. You can’t talk about the other stuff.

**DAV:** Is there a value to that silence?

**Marlantes:** No, I don’t think it’s a value. It’s a disservice. There is a code in the military that says you can’t whine and you can’t brag. Well, as I tell people, war is 95 percent things to complain about and 4 percent of things to brag about, so that doesn’t leave much left to talk about.

So what is going on here, it is a disservice to both loved ones back home and to the veterans themselves, because this isolation does lead to more self-medication and to suicide. And breaking down this barrier about having a veteran being able to talk freely about his experience and having people who love him find out what happened, you know, I think it would be a great, great help. The military can’t solve that one. It is up to us.

**DAV:** It seems like you would almost have to both violate and adhere to that philosophy in order to write about war. You are talking about these issues, but you also must spend so much time in isolation with your own demons.

**Marlantes:** Yes, the hardest thing involved was overcoming those inhibited ambitions. I talk honestly about things in *What It Is Like to Go to War* that I am not proud of. You know, I don’t think I have run into a combat vet yet who hasn’t done things he is not proud of. We are asked to do a
really dirty job for our country, and you do things. You step over the line. You are 19 and make mistakes. So, I am writing and telling my friends, and it is like slashing your wrists and bleeding all over the audience. I was a little nervous about it and there were times when I, quite frankly, did not want to write the truth. I think I even write about that in the book. And so that was hard.

**Part 2 of 5: Ancient Text, Modern Warriors and the Hero’s Journey**

**DAV:** You write about the influence of Joseph Campbell’s work and the fact that you had a very emotional talk. You also pick up some of his themes—wisdom drawn from ancient Hindu texts, The Iliad, mythology such as Temple of Mars—all the way up to modern writers on war like Tim O’Brien. Why is war such a seemingly endless trove of potential wisdom?

**Marlantes:** Well, we have learned a lot about war but, the fact is, war is changing. So what someone wrote in the Mahabharata or The Odyssey would be different than what we are experiencing today. War was personal in those days, and we are moving to a situation where we are driving to an office in Nevada and coming home after killing a few Taliban with an attack drone and saying, “Hi honey. What are we having for dinner? Oh meatloaf, good. I killed three Taliban at work today.”

You know warfare is changing so we have to continue to think about it. What does that mean for our culture? What does that mean for our morality? What does it mean for brakes that we are able to put on our innate human savagery? You don’t see the blood sometimes. It never used to be that way.

**DAV:** Campbell, he has a concept of the mythical “Heroes Journey,” with young men achieving greatness through certain trials. Does it seem to you that some men are so eager for war
because there is nothing else in our society that offers a rite of passage?

Marlantes: Yes, it is becoming a problem. Let’s go back to when we were all running around on foot and there were these initiatory rights of the hunt. Young men had to face their own death and had to do extremely dangerous things, and the young women faced childbirth with an incredibly high mortality rate. So both sexes had to be able to go through these ceremonies and face the things they had to face in order to live in their culture. And now we have flipped to a society for both sexes where there is little danger in hunting and childbirth. Our greatest fear is old age and scientists are even working on that one too.

Going to war certainly can be a higher initiatory experience with the guidance of the older people. For instance, when these young men in ancient times went through their initiatory experiences, the adults of the tribe were with them doing it. And I will tell you the truth—when I was in Vietnam, I was the second oldest in the company. I was 23. The Company Commander was 23. He was six months older than I was. And everyone else was a bunch of kids. So where were the adults?

So maybe going off to war was a substitute for these sacred rites, but it loses the meaning because the younger guys go through the experience themselves. We don’t have the “grizzled old sergeant” hanging out with them anymore like in the movies. I don’t know if we ever did. But the myth is the grizzled old sergeant. My squad and platoon leaders were 19-year-old lance corporals. So that is a big difference with war as an initiatory rite. I think we need to do more of that mentoring, but it is hard.

DAV: You write about not only the loss of these rites but also the lack of ceremony. You write about this idea of handing over the rifle to symbolically end your time as a warrior, about burying the enemy dead on the battlefield.
Marlantes: First of all, I have the feeling that many young people will probably roll their eyes about what I am going to say, but that is all right. In Vietnam, we used to throw the enemy bodies down in the canyons and just let the jungle take care of them. We didn’t bury them. And of course, our own guys who were killed were just thrown into the choppers knee deep because they were just going to end up in a body bag someplace. But we just got rid of the bodies, and there was no real sense of what really happened.

After this one particular battle we had a bunch of bodies down below us, and I was walking through the lines. I saw a couple of kids with enemy ears attached by rubber bands around their gear and helmets. And I thought, “Okay, Marlantes, you are going to have to step in here. You can’t allow this to happen.” Quite frankly, I wasn’t even that angry about it, because seeing what a machine gun does to a body makes this sort of sight almost nothing. These kids were 18 and 19. They are proud of what they did so they took a couple of trophies. And I said you can’t do this. I know they killed your friends, and you killed them. But you just can’t behave like that. So to punish them, I made them go down the hill and bury the bodies. That wasn’t a trivial order because we were taking sniper fire. So these two kids went down and dug the graves and put the bodies in.

Then they started crying. I’ve remembered that ever since. It got to them very quickly that they were dealing with other human beings. It didn’t hurt their effectiveness any. The next time we were in a battle it didn’t hurt them from pulling the trigger—not even one bit. But I think what it did it was move their healing forward 10 or 15 years when they got back. Because it is trying to deal with this split, that they are human beings on one side and these brutal warriors on the other.

Like Campbell points out, you and the enemy are just born on opposite sides from one another. You have nothing to do with
that. What you have to do is know what your motivations are. That is his ‘noble heart’ comment that is essential for warriors. And so if you disregard that, it is going to be harder when the war is over for you and you get out. The sooner you can touch on it and bring it to your consciousness, the faster the healing will be.

And also the mourning of your friends. You know, I threw close friends on choppers and never had a time or a moment to think about them. And years later, I’d wish I could have said goodbye.

Part 3 of 5: Things Lost in the ‘Enlightenment’

DAV: It seems that our military today has embraced the importance of saying goodbye to fallen comrades in small ceremonies. I am sure from what I have seen at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that is a place where saying goodbye has happened quite a lot.

Marlantes: You are on to something very important. The memorial is the place for Vietnam veterans to touch, physically touch that time period and mourn those dead people because that also is a symbolic, ceremonial part of our culture that we left behind in the so-called ‘Enlightenment.’ We threw a lot of the baby out with the bathwater. We have lost a lot of these rituals, a lot of these symbols of the more spiritual life. I think this loss is to our detriment. The wall is a place where people go to mourn, and it’s because it is a place and a piece of art—all of that is important and it works. It works.

DAV: With the Marine Corps, there is so much emphasis placed on these rites and ceremonies. It seems there could be space for the kinds of rituals you advocate.
Marlantes: You know, I think all the services are opened to this. When I was in, I think it would have benefitted the Marines to be more open to martial arts. I’m not just talking about martial arts fighting systems. I’m taking the martial art spirit. And those started out as spiritual exercises. I think the Marines have been pretty good at this over the years. I’m just saying, let’s expand the action here.

DAV: You talk about combat veterans being part of a club, which can be a means of them exchanging stories and bonding over shared experience. How useful do you think today’s veterans service organizations (VSOs) are in this regard and how they can be better?

Marlantes: I think VSOs are extremely important because so many of them facilitate a successful transition to civilian life by helping veterans with employment and education. The DAV—all the work you do in your way helps integrate these people back into the culture because they need help, whether they are disabled because of physical or psychological wounds. The DAV helped me get my PTSD rating. You guys cleared the way because the paperwork was such a challenge.

But there is a point where VSOs fall short. And not that these organizations can do something about it. The point where it falls short is that these are still veterans talking to veterans. What we need is veterans talking to non-veterans. And, how do we do that? That is why I write about this isolation veterans’ experience. It can also happen in groups. It certainly helped me tremendously to talk with a veterans group about what I did in the war. I was able to do that with other veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). But we haven’t gotten to the point where we feel comfortable or safe talking with non-veterans. I think it is important for VSOs to find a way to get non-veterans and veterans speaking openly to one another. Veterans need someone to listen and ask questions in a way that is not judging. What I am worried about is veterans-only clubs and such increasing the
isolation.

DAV: By hiding them in dark places, in fear and only talking to other veterans, how do you feel this stunts the public discourse on issues like PTSD and suicide? It seems that much of our collective conversation on these kinds of issues is rather juvenile. Do you worry about a further stigmatizing of the men and women who are coming back from war now and even Vietnam veterans who are finally talking about some of these issues? How do you have a different conversation?

Marlantes: Yes, I just want to scream at our culture because it is such an On/Off binary. We have 95 percent of combat veterans coming back, holding down jobs and raising families. They are local leaders and little league coaches. It is amazing at how well they cope. But you don’t get this sort of image of the veteran coming back. You read he or she is suicidal or on drugs. Yes, some of this is all true, but everything else this person has accomplished and become is ruled out. And the fact that the matter is all of these veterans—even those struggling—are just coping.

Hell, I coped. You look at my résumé and you would think I was a great success. I was a manager of a big corporation. That’s not bad, right? But I’m kicking around at night screaming, having night sweats and road rage. My kids would drop the milk and I would fly off the handle. I had all of this trouble at home, not to mention a divorce. But the résumé looks great. So we sort of think, “Karl is fine,” but Karl wasn’t fine. On the other hand, here’s Joe and he is a failure. He is a drug addict, but that’s okay because he is a veteran so we must treat him differently. There is a whole range of experience and, quite frankly, guys who cope still need help. Guys who struggle openly need help as well.

DAV: What has changed in our understanding of combat veterans from your time in Vietnam until now?
Marlantes: PTSD has been with us since Troy, when we were in moccasins killing each other. That has not changed. We were just not sure of what was going on. What has changed in the last 10 or 15 years is we understand brain psychology so much better. We are able to do things in terms of medicine or therapy which we could never do before. One of the main points of What It Is Like to Go To War is if you know ahead of time what is going to hit you, then you will recover faster. I think PTSD rates are about the same in every war but we recognize the symptoms now and we are actually getting government institutions to provide therapists to help with it. That has been a big change. No one treated PTSD after World War II. What do you think all of those three martini lunches during the 50s were all about?

Part 4 of 5: Back Into the Fold

DAV: Can you tell me what society can do to welcome back soldiers effectively? Not just parades. What is the effective means to welcome the warrior back to society?

Marlantes: The most effective means? I can tell you that I wanted to be hugged and thanked. I wanted welcoming arms to take me in. I wanted them to try and reach out to me and not be afraid. But civilians are afraid. Because in our culture we do not want to embarrass anybody. And we don’t want to embarrass ourselves. We have to be prepared to ask the right questions. You don’t ask questions like what it was like to kill someone. That will turn off a veteran so fast. You need to convey the idea that this person is a big part of your life, disappeared for a period of time, and came back changed. You have to convey that you know a veteran has gone through something that you do not understand. Say to them, “I would just love to understand a little about what it was like for
you guys. Can you just tell me a little bit about what it was like for you on an ordinary patrol?” Just that. It will start some talking and the first answers will be short. Okay, that’s the beginning. Sometime later, months maybe, you might continue the conversation.

The civilian has to keep on the veteran because they are going to rebuff the offer of conversation. That is just the nature of the business because they are so young. But if you start the conversation and that silent wall comes up, then keep at it patiently. If you are lucky enough, that veteran will start talking. I know many won’t talk to anybody and I’m sure that is why the suicide rates are so high. It is that isolation.

It’s not a hard thing to do in theory. Just reach out and be prepared to be rebuffed. Then reach out again and be subtle about it. The veteran will respond. He wants to be hugged. He wants to talk, but he is afraid, and the civilians are afraid as well. Get over the fear.

DAV: When I read your writing, your descriptive gifts really stand out. And the idea of Vietnam being a “beautiful untouched jungle” makes me want to see it. At so many points in your writing, Vietnam is a jungle paradise yet it intertwines with these cruel, savage images of combat. I’m curious to know how that feels when you are looking at this beautiful countryside and all of a sudden you lose a friend there. Can you ever go back and look at this countryside in the same way?

Marlantes: No, you will never look at it the same, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you will never have a positive experience with it. In fact, being aware of death, which the combat veteran has drilled into his head, makes looking at the beauty even more intense. You know life and death are around you. You know how sweet life is. And you may only get to see this a few times in your life, so you vow to really enjoy it today. It goes back to that near spiritual experience—the here
and now. It tends to focus you and even deepens the experience. Nowadays, I’ll look at this scene of beauty and it will occur to me my radio operator who died in Vietnam will never see this. And it makes me sad, and I’m getting said just talking to you about it. But you know what? It deepens the experience. It doesn’t ruin it.

DAV: There must be a process one goes through to get to where it’s not ruined or to where it is deepened.

Marlantes: Yes, it took decades before I could look at landscape and not think about where I would set out machine guns. I would just be driving down a country road and automatically say to myself, “That tree line is going to have to get defended.” It was just automatic. Thankfully it doesn’t happen as much anymore because I live in Washington and we have a lot of tree lines.

**Part 5 of 5: Every Veteran Has a Song**

DAV: There is this passage in What It’s Like to Go To War in which you describe the necessity of choosing sadness over guilt. Can you explain that to me?

Marlantes: I am no psychologist, but I am a writer and I think about things as deeply as possible. One of the reasons you have guilt is that you really can’t accept the full responsibility for what you did. When I say “replace guilt with sadness,” it’s a way of saying, “Look, I killed people when I probably could have taken them prisoner but I was in a state that is hard to understand. I was young. I had gone over some kind of edge. I had been in combat by that time for months.” I can start to look at myself as a young person and I can say, “Yes, you [screwed] up, Marlantes. You could have done it better. If you would have your current level of consciousness and conscientiousness you could have done it
better but you didn’t. There is nothing you could have done about that so you just accept what you did.” And I did that. I accepted what I did, and it was as good as it could have been. What I am left with after I accept my responsibility is sadness for what the outcome was, but that is different than guilt.

DAV: You are back to that idea of being a human caught in the snares of existence.

Marlantes: Yes, but you can’t make that the excuse. I read a lot of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, and he always comes back to “Hey, you have choice. You just have to accept what you are going to pay for it.”

I mean, I could have not pulled the trigger, I had a choice. Even though I was placed over there because I was born in the U.S. and I joined the Marines, I could have never pulled the trigger. I had a choice. But I did, and I have my reasons. One is that they were trying to kill my friends. This is a very good reason to pull the trigger. But I had a choice, so the world of opposites, almost like anything we do in life, can be used as an excuse. You cannot do this. You have to accept responsibility. I pulled the trigger when, in reality, I think if I had waited another second they might have raised their hands.

DAV: You described your writings as “your song,” which I think is kind of touching. You point out that all combat veterans have a song to sing.

Marlantes: First of all, where that comes from is an old legend about the brothers who went to the house of the sun and battled the monsters, and came back and there was an old woman—I can’t remember if she was a shaman figure or a corn-goddess figure. Everyone was afraid of these two brothers because there was thunder and lightning—the people who were left behind. They were warriors who come back and they are just
sprouting thunder and lightning, and the goddess was able to bring them back down to life and they were able to then go sing to the people. That is where that concept comes from and where I say this is my song, it is through the modern equivalent of the goddess—therapy at VA hospitals and PTSD medicines—that I am able to tell my story and sing my song and reconnect with the people I left behind so many years ago. This is what I mean by being able to sing your song and finally get back to the point where you can describe, where you can relate once again to the people you left behind, and they are no longer afraid and they will just listen to your song.

**DAV:** You have these stories captured in your mind or on pages written down. I’m sure you have many, many more that we have not yet read. But do you fear that time is like a conveyer belt moving you away from those events and those people? Or is Vietnam some place you will always be?

**Marlantes:** I don’t feel like I am moving away at all. I don’t think a day goes by that I do not think about the war and it seems like last month, not decades ago. That, I don’t think will ever change. I actually am conscious of Vietnam having happened and I bring it to consciousness and look at it. It doesn’t have the actual effect or change on me that it used to. I used to not be able to think about it. I could not have had this interview a decade ago. I would be literally trembling and shaking, and the adrenaline would be such that I would make real short fast answers and get the hell off the phone. I don’t have to do that anymore because I have gotten to a point where I can sing my song.

**DAV:** Do you feel a duty to write these stories? You speak a lot about the duties you had in Vietnam and the result of those duties, accepting orders, contemplating rejecting orders, and such. Do you feel that there is a duty to write?

**Marlantes:** We are all handed talents, and I think that there
is two ways you can deal with talents. You can put them into the service of yourself, make more money, make more power, get more glory, fame, etc. Or you can put them into service to help other people. That is your final choice. The talents are the same. And so given that I have been given certain talents, I can BS out a good story, whatever that is, and I can either use that to go to Hollywood to try to get rich or I can use it to try to communicate and use it as a value to the planet. I try to move others through the story and have people’s lives change for the better.

It sounds hopeful, but we as a society are still cynical today. But quite frankly, that is the only way you are going to be quite satisfied with your life. We are all going to die. When looking back, who will be happier—the guy who dies with $10 million in the bank or the guy who died with a happy family, wonderful relationships and did some good in this life. Well, obviously for me, it is the second choice.

**DAV:** That sounds like the psychology of a man who once struggled mightily to get Matterhorn published. That struggle must have certainly colored this philosophy.

**Marlantes:** (laughs) The novel didn’t make me rich, so I had to come up with some other reason to write it.

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