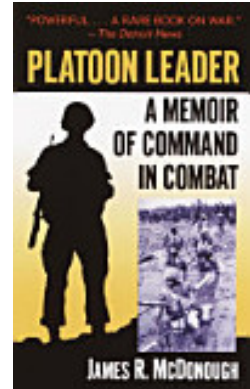




Read2Lead Module
Platoon Leader
A Memoir of Command in Combat
by James R. McDonough



Book Summary from Google Books: "A remarkable memoir of small-unit leadership and the coming of age of a young soldier in combat in Vietnam." "Using a lean style and a sense of pacing drawn from the tautest of novels, McDonough has produced a gripping account of his first command, a U.S. platoon taking part in the 'strategic hamlet' program. . . . Rather than present a potpourri of combat yarns. . . McDonough has focused a seasoned storyteller's eye on the details, people, and incidents that best communicate a visceral feel of command under fire. . . . For the author's honesty and literary craftsmanship, *Platoon Leader* seems destined to be read for a long time by second lieutenants trying to prepare for the future, veterans trying to remember the past, and civilians trying to understand what the profession of arms is all about."—*Army Times*

What is Read2Lead?

Read2Lead is a series of book studies published by the Center for Junior Officers, a small Army research center dedicated to empowering junior officers to develop themselves and their teams. Read2Lead modules give junior officers a ready-to-use product that they can integrate into leader professional development programs.

Sincere thanks to Dallas Rainey, who developed the questions for the Read2Lead Module while serving as an Assistant Professor of Military Science in the Syracuse ROTC program!

What's in this module?

Every Read2Lead module contains:

- A short summary of the book that you can circulate to prime people for reading
- Advice for running your Read2Lead session
- A series of questions that can be used in multiple sessions, with options for using the questions over different lengths of time
- Additional resources that may be helpful for the facilitator

What do I need to provide to run a Read2Lead program?

First, the time. Read2Lead sessions work best when they're done over multiple sessions, so participants can digest books in small "chunks" instead of trying to cram them in all at once. Make sure you give your participants enough time to read the book and not fake the funk.

Second, the books. Books can be purchased with a government purchase card if they remain in the hands of the unit. Buying books for a Read2Lead session can be a great kickstarter for a battalion or even brigade library. You can also provide the books to Soldiers with the expectation that they pass them along to another Soldier when they are done with them. If you choose this approach, you should ensure you mark the books appropriately per the purchasing regulations and legal guidance of your organization.

Third, the space. Read2Lead sessions should be conducted in spaces where everyone can hear and see one another. Be creative: maybe you do them as hip-pocket training on a range, or at the end of motor stables. Or as a brownbag lunch in a barracks dayroom.

When you run the actual session, think of it as a time for your Soldiers to think outside the box, discuss something beyond the day-to-day concerns of the unit, and improve their communication skills. The questions provided on the subsequent pages are a starting point, but feel free to add or substitute your own to make the session more meaningful for your Soldiers.

Platoon Leader 6 Week Program Questions

6 weeks is the optimal timing for this book. It minimizes the number of pages Soldiers have to read every week and breaks the book into meaningful chunks.

Week 1: Chapters 1-4 (36 pages)

- In just his first few days in Vietnam LT McDonough encounters several people, all of whom are coping with their experiences in Vietnam differently. What do you take away from his experiences and observations? Can a leader prepare for these moments?
- Why is understanding the effects of war so important to an Army Officer? Does the Army prepare you for the effects of war?

Week 2: Chapters 5-8 (42 pages)

- As LT McDonough assumes command of his Platoon, he quickly makes a series of decisions. How do these decisions effect his standing and place in the Platoon?
- Are LT McDonough's actions contrary to what we are typically told about moving slowly when entering a new leadership position? Do you agree with his approach or think he should have conducted himself differently?
- In Chapter 7 LT McDonough writes, "The challenge to overcome personal fear is...a deeply internalized struggle...The challenge lies in not denying fear, but in being able to function in the face of it." How do future leaders prepare to function in the face of fear?

Week 3: Chapters 9-12 (47 pages)

- LT McDonough describes multiple incidents where he must resolve a conflict between himself and one of his Soldiers. Pick one and assess it. Do you think he acts appropriately? Why or why not? Do you think he should have handled the situation differently? If so, how might you handle a similar situation?
- In Chapter 11 LT McDonough's patrol base is attacked and forced to respond. What sticks out to you as he describes his actions during the defense of his position? How does LT McDonough bring all available resources to him into the fight? During the battle LT McDonough is again faced with a tough situation while working with two Cobra gunships. What is your impression of his response? Why is it so important?
- In Chapter 12 LT McDonough writes: "Military leaders must weigh the effects of their decisions carefully because usually there is no turning back." Do you agree with his observation? If so, what does that mean to you and how does that knowledge apply as you continue your training to be an Army Officer?

Week 4: *Chapters 13-16 (54 pages)*

- In Chapter 14 LT McDonough makes a difficult personnel decision after returning from a patrol. Do you think he made the right one? Why? Are the risks of his decision worth the potential benefits?
- In Chapter 15 LT McDonough's platoon is granted three days of R&R. What do you think about their activities? What do you think about the prohibition of alcohol enforced on current Soldiers versus how LT McDonough and his Soldiers are treated?
- Do you agree or disagree with LT McDonough's tactics as he describes them in Chapter 16? He seems to identify his own potential discomfort with his actions and how to reconcile them stating, "War is not a series of case studies that can be scrutinized with objectivity. It is a series of stark confrontations that must be faced under the most emotion-wrenching conditions. War is the suffering and death of people you know, set against a background of the suffering and death of people you do not. That reality tends to prejudice the already tough choices between morality and pragmatism." What do you think of his actions and his statement above?

Week 5: *Chapters 17-20 (28 pages)*

- Do you agree or disagree with LT McDonough's decision to send members of his Platoon to the beach? Should he have gone with them? Would it have made a difference? Are you surprised by the lack of consequences for his actions?
- "They aren't gooks, they're Soldiers just like you and me." This statement is made twice during Chapter 19, which one is more striking to you? Is this an important realization/reminder for LT McDonough? When LT McDonough states it, is it for his own benefit or the young near-by lieutenant?
- CPT Moray finally makes an appearance in Chapter 20. What is your impression of him? What are his strengths and weaknesses and how do they effect his standing with LT McDonough? Is LT McDonough too aggressive as the Company prepares for the CPT's final company-level operation?

Week 6: *Chapters 21-23 (45 pages)*

- LT McDonough express frustration with his fellow Platoon Leaders of his company. Do you think his frustration warranted? Is his treatment of his peers appropriate?
- LT McDonough is nearly killed by fellow American Soldiers when trying to conduct a night link-up in Chapter 22. Could this event have been avoided? What could have been done differently that might have reduced the risk?
- After the Viet Cong destroy the village in Chapter 23, LT McDonough finishes his memoir with a simple statement: "Leadership must be positive". What do you think he means?

Platoon Leader 3 Week Program Questions

If you are pressed for time, the smallest number of sessions we recommend is three. Timing and questions for that approach are listed below.

Week 1: Chapters 1-8 (78 pages)

- In just his first few days in Vietnam LT McDonough encounters several people, all of whom are coping with their experiences in Vietnam differently. What do you take away from his experiences and observations? Can a leader prepare for these moments?
- Are LT McDonough's actions in taking charge contrary to what we are typically told about moving slowly when entering a new leadership position? Do you agree with his approach or think he should have conducted himself differently?
- In Chapter 7 LT McDonough writes, "The challenge to overcome personal fear is...a deeply internalized struggle...The challenge lies in not denying fear, but in being able to function in the face of it." How do future leaders prepare to function in the face of fear?

Week 2: Chapters 9-15 (88 pages)

- LT McDonough describes multiple incidents where he must resolve a conflict between himself and one of his Soldiers. Pick one and assess it. Do you think he acts appropriately? Why or why not? Do you think he should have handled the situation differently? If so, how might you handle a similar situation?
- In Chapter 12 LT McDonough writes: "Military leaders must weigh the effects of their decisions carefully because usually there is no turning back." Do you agree with his observation? If so, what does that mean to you and how does that knowledge apply as you continue your training to be an Army Officer?
- In Chapter 14 LT McDonough makes a difficult personnel decision after returning from a patrol. Do you think he made the right one? Why? Are the risks of his decision worth the potential benefits?

Week 3: Chapters 16-23 (78 pages)

- "They aren't gooks, they're Soldiers just like you and me." This statement is made twice during Chapter 19, which one is more striking to you? Is this an important realization/reminder for LT McDonough? When LT McDonough states it, is it for his own benefit or the young near-by lieutenant?
- LT McDonough express frustration with his fellow Platoon Leaders of his company. Do you think his frustration warranted? Is his treatment of his peers appropriate?
- After the Viet Cong destroy the village in Chapter 23, LT McDonough finishes his memoir with a simple statement: "Leadership must be positive". What do you think he means?