The Centurion Principles: Battlefield Lessons for Frontline Leaders by Jeff OLeary

Could Not Put It Down!

The Centurion Principles approaches leadership in a fresh and compelling way for leaders at all levels of responsibility. Rather than long lists of principles and ideas with explanations, this book teaches leadership concepts through captivating models, revealing the hows and whys of leaders making decisions during their most difficult hours. This approach of placing readers in the shoes of decision makers provides a realistic and gripping application of leadership principles. The book is designed to motivate a reader into becoming the kind of leader that will leave a stirring legacy—a Centurion Leader. New York Times bestselling author Colonel Jeff OLeary (ret.) illuminates the defining moments of great leaders, including Julius Caesar, Joan of Arc, and Abraham Lincoln.

My Personal Review:
The Centurion embodies selfless service and exemplary leadership and Colonel O'Leary spotlights such characteristics in short biographies throughout history, from ancient times through the American Civil War. The author skillfully links these stories and uses each to illustrate some key concepts of leadership.

We start with Hannibal in the ancient world to explore the concept of creative thought. If you have heard the phrase to "think outside the box" Hannibal takes that to extreme levels, since he was routinely overmatched yet drove the mighty Roman empire into a corner. At the conclusion of this lesson the author draws parallels to modern-day creative leaders, such as Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines.

Nothing teaches success like failure. Hannibal defeated Scipio Africanus who took his creative thinking to heart and stood his ground against all challenges, eventually securing a hard-fought victory against Hannibal.
Alexander the Great's story has always been inspiring and we learn more about the shifting strategies of inclusion in his remarkable success. This young warrior redrew the world map and left functioning communities as he went along. If you face the task of unifying different communities (departments, business units, etc) this story will resonate well.

After an interesting piece on Joan of Arc American history starts with George Washington, followed by Andrew Jackson, McClellan, Lee, and Grant, and finally Abraham Lincoln. General George McClellan is an interesting piece to include as every other biography deals with success (or at least successful leadership.) McClellan is illustrative of failure which always carries more and deeper lessons than success.

The author uses each leader to expound upon various attributes. One of Andrew Jackson's overriding qualities was persistence, a key ingredient in any successful endeavor. We learn a little about the author in this passage I am quoting:

"When I founded Mission of Joy, a nonprofit organization for homeless and orphaned children in India, I started with nothing in a country that was overwhelmed with poverty. In the first three years, a friend and I would send money over every month to cover the expenses of running an orphanage for fifteen children and four staff members. As things progressed, our resources were quickly overwhelmed by crushing need. What could we do?

"I invested my own money to buy the land and build our first facility--it cost me less than thirty thousand dollars, but it was all the money I had. We built a structure that had a ten-foot retainer wall around the entire property for protection against the high winds. When the next cyclone came, the structure held.

"I started by taking in fifteen children and ran out of resources when we grew short to fifty. I was a middle-class military officer with a family of five--what more could I do? Persist and keep on persisting. We began to enlist others who had a heart to change the world for these children. So far, our organization, Mission of Joy, has built four more orphanages, a school, twenty churches, and a widows' home. It has paved roads, dug dozens of wells, provided free medical care, and seen hundreds of children come through our doors and survive childhood.

"Who are we? No one special. We just believe that if we save one life, that person might just save a million more someday. Most of the time, the work requires us to slog through, putting one foot in front of the other under the worst conditions. It doesn't take great talent to do what we do, but it does take persistence."

It won't take persistence to devour this well written book.
Roadmap for readability
The written terrain is vast and, in some cases where names and places are difficult to master, can be a little slow going. I like to recommend a short introductory path to a book like this so that you will gain an early appreciation and willingness to tackle the more difficult elements.

Here is a simple way to uncover quickly if this book is for you or not.

I recommend reviewing the table of contents first. Then, read the introduction. It is five easy pages and will set the tone for the pages to follow.

Then, turn to chapter three and read about young Alexander the Great. The ancient world in 500 BC holds some unusually named cities and kings but for the most part this chapter is an easy read. If you are in the bookstore, take a seat and read these twenty-one pages. After that you will know if this is a book to take home for yourself or as a gift.

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