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Reading Guide for

***We Were One*, by Patrick K. O'Donnell**

Patrick O'Donnell, St. Edward class of 1988, is a noted military historian and the author of several books on military history. Though centered on more recent events – the 2004 assault on Fallujah during the war in Iraq – *We Were One* is written as a detailed historical account. As seniors in high school, just a year younger than many of the Marines who were “Boots” at the start of the story, you are certainly expected to understand the events of the book, though you need not get bogged down in the dozens of names, places, dates and operations. Rather, your more important goal should be to understand the central actions and the relationships among the men who are the main focus of the book. This is heavy subject matter for mature readers, and you are encouraged to take your time with this story. The rest of this guide consists of some background information as well as thematic questions to help guide you in your reflection on the narrative.

Background

The events of the story take place during the **Iraq War**, sometimes referred to as the **Second Gulf War** or the **War in Iraq**, that began on March 20, 2003 when an international coalition, made up primarily of U.S. and British forces, attacked the Republic of Iraq. Iraq was under control of the dictator Saddam Hussein, whom the author refers to simply as “Saddam,” along with his **Baath** party, the supporters of which were **Baathists**. Saddam's regime was widely regarded as cruel, even by dictatorial standards. He would eventually be captured by coalition forces in late 2003, tried by an Iraqi court, and executed by hanging at the hands of Iraqi officials.

The book also makes references to the **First Gulf War**, so-named for the adjacent Persian Gulf, in which the United States' first involvement was a defensive buildup in Saudi Arabia known as **Operation Desert Shield**. The crux of the conflict took place in late 1990 when Saddam Hussein's military invaded and overtook the bordering nation of Kuwait. The name of the U.S. mission then changed to **Operation Desert Storm** as American forces led an international coalition, authorized by the United Nations, to oppose the Iraqi army and defend the smaller and more vulnerable Kuwait. After an intense round of air strikes, the coalition mounted a ground campaign which so overpowered the Iraqis that fighting was finished just 100 hours after it began. In the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, some predicted a similar mismatch in which the fighting would be over nearly as quickly.

The author at times refers to two phases of **Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)** in the book. The first phase, Operation Iraqi Freedom I (**OIF-I**), was the initial attack. Begun on March 20, 2003, the major combat operations were declared complete on May 1, 2003, in a speech President George W. Bush delivered

after his memorable landing on an aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln. Saddam Hussein had gone into hiding, and his Baath party had been effectively ousted from power, but the goal of a stable, secure Iraq was still a long way off. Operation Iraqi Freedom II (**OIF-II**), then, became the military's name for the secondary effort to achieve stability in the nation. During OIF-II, fighters from other Middle Eastern nations hostile to coalition forces and the United States crossed the border into Iraq to join Iraqi resistance in fighting the enemy at their doorstep. Fallujah became a central point for these fighters and a stronghold for all who opposed the coalition forces.

The author and especially the soldiers whom he quoted used many names for the enemies they encountered. The most common are **terrorists**, **jihadists**, and **mujahideen** (or simply **muj**). Jihad, an Islamic term, translates from Arabic meaning "struggle," and it is the duty of all Muslims to struggle in the path of God, not necessarily in a violent way. One who undertakes jihad is known as a mujahid, the plural of which is mujahideen. Islamic extremists have long framed war as a defense of Islam and thus as jihad, and "holy warriors" in other conflicts throughout history have been referred to as mujahideen. The author, like the American soldiers he quotes, tends to use the terms interchangeably with "terrorists" despite their depth and historical significance. This is likewise a common practice in American and Western media.

Finally, the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was made on the basis of intelligence regarding "**weapons of mass destruction**" (**WMDs** for short) thought to be hidden by Saddam Hussein's regime. The decision to invade Iraq was controversial at the time, with Blessed Pope John Paul II opposing the justification for the war, calling it "a crime against peace." The controversy remains relevant today given that 4,491 U.S. soldiers gave their lives in the conflict, more than 32,000 were wounded, and currently over 4,000 troops remain serving in Iraq more than a decade later fighting ISIS, all while the WMD threat has long been debunked. *We Were One*, however, is not concerned with the political decision making and rarely touches upon the international ramifications of the conflict. Instead, the focus of the book is on the men of Lima Company, their humanity, and their lived realities in the face of such dramatic hardships.

Leadership as a Theme

One of the pillars of the St. Edward community is "servant leadership as way of life for all community members." With that in mind, consider the concept of leadership as you read or after you read the stories of the Marines in *We Were One*. How do they lead and follow one another? Why? And how are their relationships with one another important?

The questions below are intended to guide your understanding and reflection:

1. What are the values of the Marine Corps?
2. Why did Sojda and others insist on the buddy system?

3. How does Connor use “moto” to lead? What are the three traditions he emphasizes?
4. Hanks was a loudmouth, and some of his off-base transgressions are noted in the book. Why did men consider him to be a leader?
5. Who emerged as leaders during the story? Why did men follow them, even in life-threatening situations?
6. As regimented as military life can be, the characters demonstrated unique individuality. What characteristics did the leaders in the story have in common?
7. How did faraway leaders influence the rules of engagement (ROE)? What role did international media have in shaping the ROE for the Marines?
8. What was the impact of moto on different soldiers before the assault on Fallujah began?
9. In different places in the story, the author makes a point about the use of the word “brothers” among the men. What does it mean for the men become “brothers” to one another?
10. How does the author describe different soldiers’ thoughts on God? How does faith intertwine with the experience of war?
11. Why do Major Aouda and the Iraqis in CAP India join the fight? What was their main objective?
12. How are the relationships among the men essential in coping with loss?