

Matterhorn by Karl Marlantes

Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe that Mallory's headaches were real? Was he a malingerer? Why does Mellas feel differently? Did racial attitudes play a role?
2. When Mellas asks Hawke about racial problems, Hawke says, 'Naw, not really.' Is he downplaying the issue, or is it rooted in something else?
3. What are the political implications of Parker's hair and the incipient afro? Should the situation have been handled differently? Did Cassidy's involvement worsen it?
4. The author writes that 'the secret could be revealed only by crawling into the jungle.' Can such a secret be revealed? How does this connect to Hippy's search for meaning and to Mellas's idea that the bush would remain a mystery?
5. What compelled Vancouver to take point despite fear? Why was he considered the soul of the company?
6. Why was it so important for Mellas to recover Vancouver's sword?
7. How did race influence Mellas's decision to select Jackson as squad leader? Why did Mellas later tell Jackson that he 'blew it'?
8. Hawke's tin cup is called the cure of all ills. What is its significance? How is it similar to Vancouver's sword?
9. Is Simpson a sympathetic character? Did he risk lives for career goals? Did drinking stem from the weight of responsibility?
10. What do you think of Anne's view of Mellas's oath? Should he have consulted her? How did the cultural climate affect her reaction?
11. Mellas expresses bitterness toward women yet longs for connection. How do you reconcile this? Did the absence of women sustain that bitterness?
12. Why does Hawke call Mellas a politician? Is that positive? How does it tie to war being too technical and too political?
13. Mellas feels overwhelming joy for his platoon and then a brilliant fear as battle begins, surrendering to the 'god of war within.' What does that represent?
14. Did guilt over Pollini, the wish for a medal, and the KP discharge shape Mellas's belief he caused Pollini's death? Why is he so conflicted?
15. Mellas's existential crisis leads to calm. What produced that shift? Did he resolve guilt or will doubt remain?
16. What did medals mean to Mellas? Is his ambivalence overcome by the end?

17. What made Hawke leave his post to return to his surrounded company?
18. After the last assault on Matterhorn, Mellas asks, 'For what? Where was the meaning?' How does that explain why the author wrote the book? Did the novel change your view of Vietnam or war?
19. Why does China know Janc could not be his friend even after Janc defused a racial situation?
20. The soldiers' youth is emphasized. Did that change how you felt about the war, a draft, or policy made without their input?
21. Why did Mellas refuse to kill the injured enemy? Was it lack of nerve or a moral line he would not cross?
22. Did the book help you separate policy from the soldiers who served? Does it bridge misunderstanding toward Vietnam veterans?
23. What was the most emotional event in the book for you, and why?
24. SEMPER FI . . . what does the code of honor mean here? Did your view of that code change? Does loyalty transcend race and class?
25. 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' — how might Mellas view the claim that it is an old lie? What choices exist when conscience and duty conflict?
26. In the mock religious scene, are the soldiers absolving themselves or assigning guilt to leaders? What is the author suggesting?