

Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae, by Steven Pressfield, Bantam Books, 1999, pp. 386

*Britto Robert**

It is safe to say that most of us have enjoyed the Hollywood movie '300' for its cinematic portrayal, adrenaline-pumping fight scenes, and the passion and boldness of the Spartans. Personally, it inspired the soldier in me and sparked a curiosity to learn more about those brave men. That was when I discovered this exceptionally well-written novel by Steven Pressfield from 1998, which also served as the basis for the movie '300'. The book is by no means a factual account of the extensively researched and legendary battle; however, the lessons it imparts on military leadership, morals, camaraderie, perseverance, and more are exactly why it has been included at the United States Military Academy, the United States Naval Academy, and the Marine Corps Basic School at Quantico. Before I proceed with my review of the book, a quick overview of the history of the famous battle will help readers align their thoughts.

In 480 BC, a Persian army of over two million men led by King Xerxes crossed the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and marched to invade Greece. Xerxes, determined to avenge his father, King Darius's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks in 490 BC at the famous Battle of Marathon, has

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amassed a massive land and naval force and set out to conquer all of Greece. In this desperate effort to delay the Persian advance, the Greeks assembled a handpicked force of 300 Spartans and Theban allies, led by King Leonidas, to resist Xerxes' mighty army at the 'Pass of Thermopylae'. The pass was consciously chosen to give the few men advantage of a natural obstacle, with mountains on one side and the sea on the other. This gave the Greeks time to assemble a coalition against the advancing Persian force. The army of 300 Spartans and their allies held off the invaders for seven days until their weapons were broken, forcing them to fight with their bare hands until overwhelmed by Persian numbers. The Spartans and their allies, who set out to defend the Gate, died to the last man, but the courage, valour and sacrifice they displayed inspired the Greeks to rally and ultimately defeat the numerically superior Persians. Many historians would later even go on to say that the war preserved the beginning of Western democracy and freedom from perishing in the cradle.

The author narrates the story through Xeones, a survivor among the 300 Spartans, who is badly injured and fighting for his life. He is captured by Persian soldiers and brought to King Xerxes's court. The king summons his royal surgeons and threatens them with their lives to save the captive, and within days, Xeones can speak again. As Xeones regains his ability to speak, it is revealed that he was an officer among the Spartans, and he agrees to be interviewed. Knowing that the captive has recovered his speech, Xerxes is eager to learn from Xeones firsthand about the men who, in just three days, had killed at least 20,000 Persians. He expresses his desire to hear directly from Xeones the tactics, philosophy and psychology of these few and fearless men. Thus, the author begins to narrate the story as conversations between King Xerxes and Xeones.

The author initially recounts the tragic story of Xeones as a young boy, when he loses his parents to a cruel attack by a neighbouring clan. The sight of his village burning and the grief of losing his parents fueled a desire for revenge in Xeones while he was still young. Having always admired the Spartans for their courage and toughness, he secretly hoped they would bring justice to his family. And as fate would have it, he ends up becoming a Spartan himself. The author also doesn't forget matters of the heart and subtly weaves a tender story of love and loyalty, which Xeones nurtures for his long-separated childhood friend. As the story unfolds through the life of Xeones and his journey from boyhood to becoming a Spartan warrior, the author describes in great detail the painstaking effort and sacrifice required to be a Spartan warrior. The author also introduces us to the great Spartan warrior Dieneke

and a leader of men, who is best known for the famous anecdote recorded by Herodotus, which readers may recognise from the movie 300; where on the eve of battle, when told that the Persian archers were so numerous that their volleys blocked out the sun, Dienekes, unshaken, responds with a laugh, "Good, then we'll have our battle in the shade". Through the lives of Xeones, Dinekes and King Leonidas, the author imparts lessons of duty, honour and camaraderie that have resonated with soldiers and warfighters since time immemorial.

The author introduces the rigorous Spartan training through stories of exercises, which closely resemble the toughening of a modern Special Forces operator. These were men training to defend their land to the peril of their lives. The book offers a raw account of stories from Spartan trainees' lives, which I could relate to from my own experiences while I was on probation for the Marine Commando Force. For instance, a negligent trainee who ignores his shield while resting incites his instructor's wrath, leading to a day-long team-building activity simulating resistance offered by the enemy on the front line. This drill ends with broken and bleeding noses for many, but more importantly, it teaches a vital lesson of the cost of negligence and ill-discipline on the team.

Halfway through the book, the author builds up to the battle of Thermopylae with the Spartan warriors and their few allies marching to the 'Hot Gates' with the hopes of Greece on their shoulders to protect the gates at their peril. The author's storytelling ability is sure to keep readers engaged, offering insight into the conversations that are millennia old. I would be doing a disservice to the review if I didn't mention words of wisdom that caught my eye and are forever etched in my memory. In Chapter 22, when the Greeks are in the thick of battle, Leonidas speaks to his officers: "*You are the commanders, your men will look to you and act as you do. Let no officer keep to himself or his brother officers but circulate day-long among his men. Let them see you and see you unafraid. Where there is work to do, turn your hand to it first; the men will follow. Some of you, I see, have erected tents. Strike them at once. We will all sleep as I do in the open. Keep your men busy. If there is no work, make it up, for when soldiers have time to talk, their talk turns to fear. Action, on the other hand, produces the appetite for more action.*" He further goes on to say "*....Look to your grooming, gentlemen. Keep your hair, hands and feet clean. Eat, if you have to choke it down. Sleep, or pretend to. Don't let our men see you toss. If bad news comes, relay first to those in grade above you, never directly to your men. Instruct your squires to buff each man's aspis (large round Spartan Shield) to its most brilliant sheen I want to see shields flashing like mirrors, for this sight strikes*

fear into the enemy. Leave time for your men to sharpen their spears, for he who whets his steel, whets his courage.” And then before the fateful battle, Leonidas ends with these few words to his men: “*Now eat a good breakfast, men, for we’ll all be sharing dinner in hell.*”

The author’s ability to capture moments of glory, leadership and the Spartan legacy with Homeric finesse is sure to give readers goosebumps. The book shines as a compelling exploration of military ethics, honour and camaraderie. Every reader would surely find a quote from the book they would want etched on the walls and minds of men and women serving in uniform. The narration of events reminded me of the incredible account of our 21 Sikh soldiers, from the 36th Sikh Regiment of the then-British Indian Army, who stood their ground against an estimated 10,000 plus Afghan fighters in the *Battle of Saragarhi* in 1897; our own 300 moment, almost 2,500 years later. It also reminds me of what Adm JC Wiley famously wrote decades later, “*The ultimate determinant in war is the man on the scene with the gun. This man is the final power in war. He is control. He determines who wins. This is the soldier.*” With technology pushing humans out of the loop in almost every field, warfighting and matters of war can never discount the role of the individual. As Paul Scharre notes in his bestseller *Army of None*: “*Embrace technology where it can make precise and humane, but when the choice is life and death, there is no replacement for the human heart.*” Therefore, the responsibility to instill in our future military leaders the principles of integrity, ethics, duty, honour, courage and sacrifice is more important than ever and will make all the difference in the line of fire. Hence, it is recommended that this book be included in the reading lists for cadets in our military academies and colleges. And for the men and women in uniform, the read is sure to boost their pride and morale as protectors of our motherland.