

Guardian Rising: Meditations for the Future Warrior

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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Joining the military is a serious decision one should make with care and reflection. *Guardian Rising: Meditations for the Future Warrior* by US Army veteran Michael Novotny serves as a thoughtful guide for potential enlistees. The conversational tone emphasized the importance of self-awareness, resilience, and wellness for a successful military career. The book is structured into three parts— *Before You Ruck Up*, *Finding Your Target*, and *Lead with Your Good Foot*. Each section prepares its readers for the challenges of military life while equipping them with skills to navigate their journey with purpose and clarity. *Guardian Rising* approaches personal development through broad military values such as loyalty, respect, and integrity. The self-reflections give its readers points to ponder before joining the military. Designed for individuals aged 17–42, the book provides the opportunity to thoroughly evaluate one's mindset. Novotny used examples from great philosophers (i.e., Socrates, Descartes, Plato, Laozi, and Buddha) to resonate with the points he presents; however, they may not resonate with every reader who is not interested in the philosophical approach. Overall, *Guardian Rising* is an engaging read that assists in the decision-making process regarding joining the military.

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Joining the military is a noble decision that should not be made lightly. Novotny opens with an Author's Note asking, "So, you're thinking about joining the military?" (para. 1). His conversational approach invites the reader and sets the tone that this book will guide them in exploring their wellness and resilience. He says, "*Guardian Rising* is meant to explore you while laying the foundation for a promising future. It is designed to help you ask yourself questions and search for your answers" (para. 4). As inferred from the opening question, the reader is likely considering a career in the United States Military. According to Military One Source, the military is a great career option. They state, "There is no higher honor than defending our nation and serving our country. Those who serve in the military are both warriors and guardians of the United States" (2024, September 5). One added benefit of military service includes the strong values of integrity and personal responsibility that are instilled in each service member. Skills such as leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, and discipline can be acquired, which are valued by civilian employers (2024, August 19).

Understanding the demographics of active-duty members in the armed forces provides insight into whom *Guardian Rising* is best suited. In 2023, there were more than 1.2 million active-duty members. Most (96%) hold a high school diploma/GED, and nearly one-quarter (23.7%) hold a bachelor's or advanced degree. Almost half (42.9%) are between the ages of 18–25, and one-quarter (21.7%) are between the ages of 26–30 (US Department of Defense, 2023). With just under 65% of active-duty members falling between 18–30 years of age, *Guardian Rising* is a call to action in which Novotny asks every future guardian to seek out the proper tools to build self-awareness, practice self-regulation, and maintain a solid self-care routine (p. 170).

Although interesting, I have identified several limitations within this work based on my anecdotal experience of working with college-aged students for the past 18 years in emerging adulthood (see Arnett, 2000). First, I am unsure of how many college-aged persons are developmentally willing to participate in the level of self-reflection suggested by Novotny in *Guardian Rising*. Throughout the book, Novotny proposed reflective questions and has several self-reflection moments for the reader to think critically about their responses. The questions are surface level, which provides an inviting moment for the reader to reflect, but will the targeted demographic truly engage to get the most from the book? Another limitation is the strong reliance on philosophy. Although the examples used are approachable, from my experience, the average 18 to 24-year-old may not be ready to "lean" into them.

In Part I- *Before You Ruck Up*, there are three chapters: *Check Your Azimuth*, *Check Your Brain Housing Group*, and *Stay Frosty*. This section focused solely on the reader. Understanding factors like personal character, desire to learn, and the ability to remain flexible and open-minded plays a significant role in personal and professional life, whether in the military or elsewhere. Chapter one described azimuth as your compass. Using a quote by Socrates, "The unexamined life is not worth living," the reader is introduced to meditation and self-exploration through questioning. "Exploring your idea of self is hard but necessary work. Lots of questions must be asked, and your attention must go to the one thing that is easily neglected on a daily basis—you!" (p. 27). The following topics are addressed: character, morals, toeing the line, ignorance, intellect, reading, ego, grace, and forgiveness. A simple version of the Socratic method is used through self-reflection questions. Novotny challenges the reader to "...continuously seek out knowledge to help guide and inform your moral compass" (p. 39). These topics suggest that understanding who you are and how you react in situations will impact your communication and engagements with others in your military unit. Novotny is clear that the military will test you. Concerning ego, he suggested creating a mantra to assist in overcoming challenging situations. "As you adjust to all the pain and discomfort meant to turn you into a warrior, try exercising a degree of gratitude by saying 'I am grateful.'" (p. 47).

Chapter two introduced René Descartes, a 17th-century French philosopher and soldier. The reader is challenged to question everything through the context of brain functioning and how one thinks. Naturally, the reader would ask, "Why?" to which Novotny responds with "...everything you do is mental" (p. 58). In drawing a connection to military life and understanding the mental game, he used this analogy, "Jumping into the military without a fundamental understanding of the mind is like going to war without a ballistic vest. Sure, you might be able to survive without it, but why risk it?" (p. 58). Topics in this chapter included brain functioning, particularly the response to stress, decision-making, impulsivity, overthinking, fear, self-doubt, mindfulness, and inner surveillance (pp. 60–62). Since meditation is prevalent throughout the book, Novotny begins with a compelling argument for how a 15-minute daily meditation can drastically improve one's life. Studies show that consistent meditation (eight weeks or more) can alter the expression of 172 different genes. These genes are responsible for regulating things like glucose metabolism, inflammation, and circadian rhythms. In a sense, you have the power to regulate yourself at the cellular level if you have the right mindset and belief that it is possible (p. 77).

Stay frosty is military slang for staying alert (p. 81). In chapter three, Margaret Mead's thought that "the notion that we are products of our environment is our greatest sin; we are products of our choices" is explored (p. 79). By acknowledging that the reader may be a young adult, Novotny suggested that the newfound level of autonomy, including income, living independently, and controlling your destiny, requires practicing self-discipline, common sense, and moderation (pp. 81–82). This chapter focused on common vices that all individuals are subject to, but particularly for those who enlisted due to increased access to them. Topics addressed are technology addiction and information consumption, negativity—both covert and overt (p. 87), drugs, alcohol, food consumption, and sleep. Most people have a sense of how these topics can positively and negatively affect oneself based on personal choices; however, a greater connection is drawn to how they can affect a service member.

Part II- *Finding Your Target*, consists of three chapters: *Adjust Your Sights*, *Hit Your Flow*, and *Rest in Stillness*. This section reflected on the type of future you want (p. 167). Chapter four honed in on understanding what you want for your future at this moment in time. It provided an outlook to strive for, knowing that some things may change. By focusing on the following topics, you will have more direction to understand where you want to go. Topics in this chapter are success, shifting perspective, wealth, love, fear, and potential. In this chapter, Novotny draws on personal reflection to illustrate how he navigated bringing things into focus. There are four self-reflections for the reader to sit with and think. The first reflection provided guiding questions for the reader to develop what success looks like (p. 105). In the second reflection, the reader can think about ways they have already encountered life-shifting experiences. Emotion and results are prompts to develop a robust response (p. 111). Next, the reader is charged with reflecting on how they grew up. For example, what was the importance of money and spending? Both finite and infinite wealth are explored in this response (p. 114). Finally, love, fear, and potential. This self-reflection is more ambiguous, but if given appropriate time to reflect, it will facilitate a deeper understanding of the topics (p. 119).

Chapter Five discussed resistance. Resistance is an unavoidable part of life. Philosophers Laozi (Lao-tzu) and Sun Tzu promoted restraint strategies by examining winning without fighting. Their work expands your mind to abstract ideas like fighting without fighting (p. 123). Flow is introduced by Novotny, described as a "Zen-like state of mind" (p. 124). Examples of Bruce Lee and an NFL quarterback demonstrate flow regarding their sport.

He suggested participating in yoga or tai chi to cultivate positive energy and flow in your life (p. 130).

In chapter seven, Novotny emphasizes the ability to rest in stillness. He described this as blocking out the noise around you. The path to meditation is achieved by attaining clarity and cultivating presence (p. 133). This chapter explored which type of meditation may suit you best and suggested podcasts and experiential learning. Meditation is not something you can solely learn through reading (p. 134). Everyone's meditative journey will look different, but keeping an open mind and trying various strategies will help you find stillness and the ability to settle your mind in a heightened environment that you cannot just simply turn off. Part III- *Lead with Your Good Foot*, focused on your external environment and keeping an open mind to understand the nature of problems you will encounter (p. 168). With chapters titled *March with Appreciation and Gratitude*, *Double Time Out of Your Cave*, and *Watch Your Step*, Novotny focused on understanding the nature of the problems you will encounter (p. 168). In chapter seven, he explained that when things are not going as planned, you should begin paying close attention to your thoughts, emotions, and actions. He suggested exploring the situation from a different perspective by asking if there is something to learn from the current state of affairs? (p. 143).

Chapter eight discussed leaving home, connection and loneliness, racism, and inequality. The self-reflection asked the reader to step into their feelings and emotions about living abroad. Questions like, "How will you communicate with non-English speakers?" and "[what are] your thoughts on new and exotic foods?" (p. 148) will help one explore things they are uncertain of before making the move. When discussing loneliness, Novotny offered that even among soldiers, life can be lonely, but how will you cultivate relationships (old and new)? He stressed that positive thinking could produce positive results. Maintaining a positive attitude is much easier said than done. Novotny stated, "If you don't do anything else, at least wake up every single day and give the world your best attempt at being non-judgmental and unbiased" (p. 153).

The final chapter used Buddha's teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to illustrate the tenets and teachings that help us understand the nature of problems (pp. 158–159). In a final discussion on problem-creating/solving, Novotny suggested focusing on what you should do as a problem-creator. This included assessing the situation and seeking feedback (p. 161). Having problems is not always a bad thing. It is how they are handled that can significantly affect the outcome. Becoming a good problem-solver is not an overnight process but rather a

skill that is developed through years of experience (p. 163). He concluded that successful problem-solvers understand balancing wants and needs (p. 164).

The goal of *Guardian Rising*, as explained by Novotny, is to provide a plethora of tools to help you become a strong mental alchemist (p. 168). The word journey can be used to describe one's life in the military as well as one's state while reading this book. Readers are encouraged to frequently engage with the self-reflection questions to better understand themselves as potential service members. Recommendations include reading philosophy to learn the essentials of living well and seeking out lessons from previous warriors to use them to your advantage. The biggest takeaway is to learn from the past. "Knowledge and self-reflection will put you on the path to mastering yourself. Self-mastery will take you far in the military and in life" (p. 169).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Competing interests for this book could be other self-help or leadership books.

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