Main Point Summary/Background:
Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* is more than a chronicle of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire. It also provides readers with an eyewitness account of one of the most important military campaigns in military history. It is also a biography (unauthorized) of conquistador Hernán Cortés. Ultimately, this text can be considered an ode to the many unknown soldiers that took part in this campaign.

Related Readings:
This reading is related to the other texts in subunit 2.1 (“The Conquest of Mexico”), such as Dale Hoyt Palfrey’s “The Spanish Conquest (1519–1521)”; but it especially connects to those in sub-units 2.1.2 (“Aztec Encounters”) and 2.1.2 (“March to Tenochtitlan”).

Instructions:
Following are excerpts from the reading that help to answer the study questions. Review these answers after you have completed the study questions. Highlighting or taking notes while you read paired with later outlining and paraphrasing is an excellent method to ensure comprehension and retention of difficult material.

1. In his book, Díaz offers a very complete and unbiased depiction of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. He describes Cortés as a capable and inspiring leader who he admired (“...Cortés was not a man to be turned back either by complaints or fears. He made the discontented men a speech stuffed so full of classical allusions that he fairly drove them from the field, and then, turning to the future prophesied victory...”). However, Díaz also saw Cortés’s faults. For example, he wrote the following: “...Cortés was not by nature grateful ....”

2. According to Díaz, he acted like all of them. Above all, Hernán Cortés was an explorer and a conqueror. It is clear that Cortés’s main goals were to claim these lands for Spain and to find gold and other riches (for his king and for himself). However, like all other conquistadors, he was entrusted with creating the right circumstances for the spreading of the Christian faith in the New World. In fact, Díaz describes Cortés as a devoted Catholic (“...when an Indian asked why the Spaniards knelt before a stick [meaning the Cross], Cortés held forth upon the Christian religion in a way few theologians could have equaled...”). Thus, Cortés’s role in the New World was not just that of an explorer and conqueror, but also that of a missionary.

3. The non-Aztecan groups, as for example the Tlascalans, encountered by
the Spaniards during their journey toward Mexico City, were friendly to the conquistadors. There are two main reasons for their welcoming attitude. Firstly, it is quite possible that they simply were enchanted by wonder at the vision of the newcomers; but secondly, the Spaniards offered them protection from the oppressing Aztec Empire.

4. According to Díaz, the Spaniards were treated with respect and signs of friendship by Montezuma and his men. While on their way to the capital, Díaz tells us that “Montezuma had sent rich presents, amongst which figured a sun made of gold and a great silver moon....” In the Aztec capital, he not only fed and clothed them but even allowed the conquistadors to build their own place of worship. In fact, according to Díaz, it was his “friendly” attitude toward the newcomers that killed Montezuma. Remember that Díaz claims that Cortés forced Montezuma to ask his subjects to cease any attacks against the Spaniards, for which his people pelted him with rocks and darts.

5. Bernal Díaz del Castillo was a common soldier who, on many occasions, seemed to resent the higher ranks. For example, he wrote the following: “I used to say in those days that all that they (the envoys) were concerned about was for their own fortunes and that of Cortés, and that as regards us, who did the fighting and put Cortés into the position that he occupied, we were left still struggling with our difficulties.”

6. According to Díaz, Doña Marina was seen as “…a traitor to her countrymen, having lost the whole world—that is, the whole of her world—for the love of Cortés....” However, she was a hero to the Spaniards. Díaz makes sure in his narrative to pay tribute to her, expressing in several occasions how without her help the conquest of Mexico would not have been possible.

7. Díaz wrote this narrative as a tribute to the many others (apart from Cortés) who took part in the conquest of the Aztec Empire. It is quite probable that he intentionally avoids giving what he might consider too many unnecessary details that could distract readers from his ultimate goal: a tribute to the unknown soldier.

8. The book states that, “The wealth of vegetation and the waters of the lake, the white volcanoes in the distance, and the clear air of the great plateau, inevitably reminded all the soldiers of their native land. Well did they name the country, ‘The New Spain.’”