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Why Study Military History?

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Abstract

Professional soldiers need to study military history in order to gain a better understanding of our tactics, operational philosophy, and strategic goals. By studying military history, one can identify hundreds of events that have shaped our Army and the way we operate. It is imperative for the professional soldier to understand why we conduct business the way we do. The modern battlefield is changing and we need to have some knowledge of our enemy, their culture, and their customs. It is not acceptable to ignore civilians on the battlefield and we must prepare to interface with them directly. This paper will point out several events that directly affected the Army and how we changed doctrine based on this historical information.

Why Study Military History?

Throughout the history of the Army, there has been much debate concerning the study of history as a means to improve tactics and strategy. Through our lessons learned, we have developed our Army into a mighty and highly sophisticated service that has proven capable of conducting operations in all corners of the world. By studying our history, we can learn how conflicts started, the battles won or lost, and the effects of these events. Therefore, to be successful, we must study our history to understand how our tactical, operational, and strategic levels have evolved and reasons for the successes and failures of war.

As our technology increases, we must always remember that the ground soldiers will determine the outcome of any conflict. Leaders must insure that we train our soldiers with better team and squad level tactics. Modern warfare requires more cultural understanding and civilian contact on the battlefield. Junior leaders are making the on the spot command decisions while out on patrol or while providing checkpoint operations. We have all seen the effects on the national level for the actions of our enlisted soldiers. We must equip our soldiers with a greater understanding of our enemies' culture. The days of an all out war and kill everything that moves mentality is outdated.

One may think that the study of history is not important. Imagine not knowing the history of tactics we use in the Army. Would we still line up in skirmish lines and march directly into the lines of our enemies? Would we use flanking, bounding, traveling, or

over watch movement techniques? We learn through our experiences, our history, and develop changes in our tactics and implement new technology. We have improved our Army in strategy, command and control, tactics, and leadership largely based on lessons learned from past battles or conflicts. Not only does the study of history help us improve our Army, but it also teaches us about other armies how they train, their tactics, and their customs. Through the historical study of our enemies, we learn the difference between our societies, difference in our religious beliefs, and the difference in our cultures, which are factors that greatly influence the battlefield.

For instance, the civil war history taught us that the same linear tactics of past wars and conflicts were not effective with the introduction of new technology such as the smooth bore rifle (Nolan, 2007, p. 20). We were no longer able to muster large battalions of men to form skirmish lines standing shoulder to shoulder and charge the enemy's line. The new rifle allowed for increased range, better accuracy, and quicker reloading. The result usually favored the defense, but the side with the most soldiers would usually push the weaker side off the battlefield. In 1864-1865 as the war progressed, it became evident that the use of movement tactics, guerrilla warfare, and siege operations, were much more effective.

The use of cavalry attacking the rear areas and flanks became a new tactic that proved more effective. Because of their mobility, the cavalry could protect the flanks of infantry lines on march, penetrate to the rear of the enemy formations, exploit weaknesses in the enemy flank causing the enemy to commit the reserves (Nolan, 2007, p. 140). This change in tactics continued to develop a mobile, flexible, and spearhead type of approach on the battlefield. In addition, we found good examples of civilians on the battlefield.

Civilians became targets, their houses burned, and their rations stolen. Once an army wronged a town of people, the entire town would join the fight in order to preserve their way of life. The war affected them directly and the fight became personal to them. We discovered the need to learn the customs, tendencies, and history of our enemy. By protecting the civilian population from the war, and not targeting the civilian population, it may have ended the war sooner. This is one strong example for the implementation of proliferation and pacification programs we use today.

During the World War I and World War II era, we realized the need to change our soldier tactics with the implantation of new technology. The direct support tank, the machinegun, and long-range artillery forever changed the face of war. They increased our range and increased the precession of target engagement; however, our tactics did not always change with the implantation. One example is a ground assault with artillery covering fire, as our barrage of artillery fire lifted or increased range, our soldiers in most cases could not maintain the forward movement. The German Army recognized this fact, and dug deep bunkers to protect them from the barrage of artillery covering fire. As the artillery fire moved forward or shifted, they simply came out of the bunker, set up their machine guns, and fired upon the soldiers caught in the open. This left the soldier in “no mans land” without covering artillery fire (Alexander, 2000). The breakdown was simple, no communication. This is a good example of the implementation of contingency plans we put into place before every mission. For example, what happens if our forward advance stalls? What do we do if our covering fire is out running the advance? How do we correct our rate of march? This is an example of history that professional soldiers need to learn and remember. It is a leader’s responsibility to ensure all of his soldiers are

fully informed, rehearse the mission, know contingency plans, and are continuously preparing for the mission.

Now, let us look to our current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. After the attacks of 9/11, the American public was outraged and wanted revenge for this cowardly attack. However, the first question that needed an answer was whom do we hold accountable. The Taliban government was in power in Afghanistan and is allies with Al Qaeda, and Osama Bin Laden. "Terrorist and insurgents have no national standing, no government, no uniformed army, no allegiance to international law, no interest in humanity, and no restrictions on the weapons they are willing to use to achieve economic, political, and theocratic domination of the world (Hearn, 2006, p. 7). Osama Bin Laden uses this fact in his favor. Without a government to hold accountable, we can only look to those countries that support terrorist organizations. We have to ask for their permission, The Taliban, to pursue terrorist in their country. This tactic did not work as well as Osama might have thought. We set in motion to invade Afghanistan, topple the Taliban, and destroy Al Qaeda. Bin Laden is still at large in his defiance against one of the strongest and best military in the world. Bin Laden realizes that he only has to wait and plan his attacks that will gain the most press coverage. He uses guerilla warfare tactics to equal the playing field between a large military and his terrorist group, just like the NVA used during the Vietnam War. One way this has been so effective, is because he has gained some support from the local population. He has effectively portrayed the American military as invaders and infidels. He uses our bombings in Japan, North Vietnam, and Korea as indiscriminate raids against innocent civilians to prove his point. This cultural identification and understanding should remain one of our main focal points in dealing

with terrorism. We have made great progress in dealing with the social, cultural, and economic differences between our countries, and we, as leaders need to understand these lessons learned and continue to train our soldiers for future battles (Mueller, 2004).

In many ways Iraq is much of the same scenario as Afghanistan, but with some distinct differences. In Iraq, we faced an organized government with official military assets. The delay of action between operation desert fox, the invasion, and the multitude of threats in between, allowed plenty of time for Saddam Hussein to move the weapons of mass destruction. Some argue the point that Saddam did not have weapons of mass destruction and we should not attack. We may never know the full truth, but one fact remains, Iraq supported terrorist groups that have anti-American feelings. This political issue aside, the invasion was an enormous tactical victory for the American military and its allies. The military overpowered the Iraqi army with a vicious pace, air attacks, flanking assaults, and front line engagements. Some refer to this tactic as “The American Way of War”; it is characterized by speed, maneuver, flexibility, and quick victory with minimal casualties (Boot M. 2003, para. 1). The tactics built on the “German Blitzkrieg,” tactics that capitalize on enemies weaknesses and penetrate deep into the enemy rear (Hofman & Starry, 1999). These tactics used massed firepower and combined arms to defeat an enemy that had greater numbers of troops. The major setback was holding the ground after the advancing American Army passed through. This void left pockets of insurgents that caused havoc in the rear lines. One lesson we learned is there are few militaries in the world able to stand against us on the battlefield. With this speed of movement, we must identify ways to hold the rear areas, so we are not retaking the same land twice. Our implementation of training the local population to

secure their towns is working, but it appears we are learning our proliferation and pacification lessons again.

The value of studying history and lesson learned must not be oversold. Everyone would agree that studying history cannot teach us the exact science of war and there is no single answer for all situations. “Studying the stories of individuals and situations in the past allows a student of history to test his or her moral sense, to hone it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult settings” (Stearns, 2007, para. 4). In the end, history cannot teach us everything we need to know about modern day warfare, but will help us prepare for future encounters.

The study of history by professional military people is important, if for no other reason but to further educate ourselves. By studying history, we can identify our strengths, weaknesses, and those of our enemies. The battlefield and technology will continue to change and we as professionals must change as well. Therefore, to be successful, we must study our history to understand how our tactical, operational, and strategic levels have evolved and reasons for the successes and failures of war.

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