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The Importance of the Study of Military History for the Modern Military Professional

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The study of military history is as old as the history of warfare itself. From the ancient battlefields, surviving commanders and troops alike carried the lessons learned through trial and error into subsequent battles hoping to better their next opponent by not repeating their past mistakes and improving their tactics and techniques. From the writings of the Greek historian Thucydides to the modern scholars of the United States Army's War College, an untold number of volumes of military history are available to today's military leaders. The study of military history by modern military professionals is critical to the development of skills directly applicable on the battlefields of today and the future. For today's military leaders, learning from past battles and campaigns remains as important as ever. It is rightly noted that the current generation of military leaders are "faced [with] complex challenges to national security" which makes the study of American military history "of increasing interest and importance."¹ The development of critical thinking and decision making skills under the duress of battle is essential to their ultimate ability to perform their leadership functions. The study of military history uniquely prepares these leaders for the proverbial "next battle" by drawing from a wealth of lessons learned in past conflicts.

Many examples of the importance of the study and analysis of prior battles and campaigns exist within the context of American military history. As Professor Jay Luvaas describes it, military history is "practicable if it yields lessons, especially exemplary lessons in tactics and strategy that can be directly applied to some current situation."² These three specific illustrations gleaned from the H100 modules and associated references provide cases in point of how lessons

observed in previous conflicts and battles did (or should have) influenced the decision making of leaders in later conflicts.

During the 1750s in the conflict known as the French and Indian War on the North American continent (known in Europe as the Seven Years War), the British regular Army was paired with the British colonists organized in militias to give battle to the French army and various Native American tribes allied with them in a struggle over territory in the new world. Many of the colonists had some experience or historical awareness of lessons learned in previous smaller conflicts with Native Americans. These lessons were hard learned out of the necessity of protection of the colonist's homes, families and their continued existence in the colonies. As an example, during the Pequot War of 1637, John Eliot commented "that God pleased to show us the vanity of our military skill in managing our arms after the European mode."³ The colonists adapted their tactics or as Eliot put it, "we are glad to learn the skulking way of war."⁴

However, these lessons were not resident in the minds of the commanders from the British Army operating in North America. Their thinking, strategy and tactics were deeply rooted in the formalize system of battle as practiced by European armies of the day. In Europe, battles most often occurred in an area of large, open terrain that allowed for the massing of troops under similar armament and the movement of those troops by linear tactics. Both Armies were led by commanders who mutually agreed to certain rules for "civilized warfare" which were always observed while engaged. The British military leaders were universally trained and tested in this method of warfare.

In contrast, the Native American tribes allied with the French in North America were unconstrained by rigid doctrine or notions of civilized warfare. Much like the colonists, they viewed the struggle as critical to the protection of their existence and their right to remain in certain areas of the territory. The tribes and their leaders were trained in the history and experience of previous conflicts with colonists and other tribes. Whereas the British were constricted by the lack of open terrain, the French and the Native Americans used the restrictive terrain to their full advantage.

Another example of the importance of the study of military history is the experience of both the British Army and the American forces engaged during the American Revolutionary War. Although this conflict began about twenty years after the French and Indian War, the influence on the operations and thinking of these two forces and their leaders differs considerably. During the early stages of the Revolution, General Washington, commander of the Continental Army and veteran of the French and Indian War, attempted to raise, equip, train and fight the American Regulars as any British commander of the day would have done. His efforts met with little success during those early stages as he was unable to match the British in any semblance of conventional warfare. For their part, the British fought the conflict as a European-style war throughout the duration of the conflict.

However, the lessons learned early in his military career were not totally lost on George Washington. During the cold winter night of December 25, 1776, Washington led his army in crossing the icy Delaware River to conduct a surprise

attack on the Hessian forces stationed at Trenton, New Jersey. Known as the Battle of Trenton, Washington's actions, attacking in the dead of winter on Christmas, were considered to be uncivilized by British military leaders. Other American leaders such as Nathaniel Greene in the southern states continued to successfully apply the lessons of unconventional warfare during the Revolutionary War. Although never winning a single battle in the classic sense, Greene managed to outmaneuver British General Cornwallis through hundreds of miles of hostile territory finally abandoning the campaign.

As a final example, the American Civil War demonstrated the powerful effect that images of the death and dying on the battlefield can have on the popular support to a conflict. The Civil War was the first conflict where photography was used extensively to capture images of Soldiers alive, wounded and dead. It was the "grim and terrible" photographs of the dead Soldiers that, for the first time, reveal the "dark and cruel side of war" to the American public.⁵ After the bloodiest battle of the war at Sharpsburg, Maryland in September 1862, photographer Alexander Gardner's staff photographed many of the dead and wounded Soldiers across the battlefield and publicly displayed them at Gardner's studio in Washington, D.C. This exhibit outraged the public and along with the continuing flow of images from successive battles, it helped give rise to a large anti-war sentiment in the north that resulted in Major General George McClellan running as the "peace" Democrat during the 1864 election. This outcry against the war was overcome only by President Lincoln's leadership in the area of emancipation

of the slaves and Major General William T. Sherman's victory in the Battle of Atlanta.

Over the ensuing 130 years of American history, two cases reveal the cost and benefit of this lesson. During the Vietnam conflict, television brought the horrors of the war into American living rooms and contributed to the loss of popular support for the conflict and the ultimate unfavorable resolution of the war. The media coverage led to a situation where "initial enthusiasm and support gave way to skepticism, then to pessimism and finally to active opposition."⁶ The Tet Offensive of 1968, although in reality a victory for the United States and South Vietnamese forces, was generally perceived to be an overwhelming defeat due to the media coverage.

In contrast, the Department of Defense made a deliberate decision to embed reporters with tactical units during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Reporters from a variety of media outlets were allowed to travel with company-level units as they moved north from Kuwait. This decision was a direct effort to avoid a repeat of the failures of the Vietnam conflict and give maximum access to the press in turn providing a unique view of the troops and the war to the American public. Although later in the conflict many members of the media help turn sentiment against continuing the prolonged conflict, the initial decision to embed the reporters "proved to be both a popular and rewarding move" that help gain support for the invasion of Iraq with the American people.⁷

Dr. Leonard Wong of the Army War College correctly states that "[t]he ability to be a world-class warrior rests upon the foundation of technical and tactical

competence formed early” in the career of a military leader.⁸ This competency for those who lead troops in battle is “planted in the study of military history” and is critical to avoid previous mistakes and improve tactics, techniques and procedures.⁹ Clearly, by virtue of becoming a professional military leader, studying and analyzing the battles of the past is a key task that must be completed on a continuing basis. As numerous examples illustrate, failure to learn from past military operations will only serve to potentially repeat those mistake in the future.

As President John F. Kennedy once said, “History is a relentless master.” Military leaders would do well to remember his words and acknowledge the role military history plays in the development of military leaders of today and the future.

ENDNOTES

¹ American Military History, Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988 edition.

² Luvaas, Jay, "Military History: Is It Still Practicable?" *Parameters*, Army War College, March 1982.

³ Taken from Module H102A, USASMA History Lessons, "Imperial Soldiers in a Foreign Land—The British Experience in North America, 1754-1783," 1 April 2008.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ Miller and Lanier, The Photographic History of the Civil War: Prisons and Hospitals; The Review of Reviews Company, New York, 1911.

⁶ Kroesen, Frederick J., "Not Another Vietnam," *Army*, February 2004.

⁷ IBID.

⁸ Wong, Leonard, "Strategic Leadership Competencies, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, September 2003.

⁹ IBID.

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