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The Value of Military History

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Class 58

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17 March 2008

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Abstract

Military history has an increasing impact on the planning and execution of current wartime operations. It is imperative that military professionals develop the art of studying and evaluating past battles, leadership styles, conventional and nonconventional wartime methods. Much can be learned for military history by studying NCO's like Sgt Alvin York, the Freedman's Bureau and Poncho Villa.

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## The Value of Military History

Military history has an increasing impact on the planning and execution of current wartime operations. It is imperative that military professionals develop the art of studying and evaluating past battles, leadership styles, conventional and nonconventional wartime methods. Lessons learned and applied could save countless lives and position the United States Military to see a better and much quicker resolve to some of the wartime issues we currently face today. There is a lot to learn by studying NCO's like Alvin York, the Freedman's Bureau and the Mexican Expedition.

Military History encompasses many years of conflict and conflict resolution. Battles between individuals, tribes, countries and even battles involving several different nations have all been fought over the course of our history. Unconventional wars as well as conventional wars have been fought all across the globe. Each battle/war has its own set of rules, tactics, strategies and weaponry. As we look at Military History we understand that it can be studied from a myriad of perspectives. We can study history by looking at different periods of warfare, battle spaces, tactics, weapons, strategies, logistics, and organizations. Basic strategies and tactics have changed constantly over thousands of years. Recently we have experienced the change of warfare from unconventional warfare to conventional warfare. Conventional warfare involves well-identified, armed forces fighting one another in a relatively open and straightforward way without weapons of mass destruction. (Wikipedia, 2008) Unconventional warfare refers to other types of war which can involve raiding, guerrilla, insurgency, and terrorist tactics or alternatively can include nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare. (Wikipedia, 2008)

We can also look at war from a much broader perspective such as low intensity conflicts verses high intensity conflict. There are valuable lessons and insight to gain from each of the methods available. It is up to the current leadership to study and grasp information that can assist the military in its current wartime mission.

Military history is important to our nation as well as to our military because it provides valuable insight to assist us in our current and future wartime missions. Although as a military we seem to study history well our deficiency lies in our inability to apply lessons learned to current situations. Whether we choose to blatantly ignore what we have learned or we simply don't refer to it at the appropriate time is a question that resonates in the minds of many military leaders, subordinates and civilians all across this country. If our military would take lessons learned from the past and apply them we could often times prevent the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. We could also prevent the proverbial "reinventing of the wheel". Far too often the military is reminded of how things were done in the past after the battle is over. Often times the reminder comes in the face of a tragic casualty count and a loss of millions if not billions of taxpayers' dollars. It is amazing how this cycle continues to repeat itself. Perhaps it is because some leaders want to forget how it was done in the past and do it their own way. Many times against counsel of top advisers and those closest to them some leaders do exactly that; they do it their own way. Some leaders simply want to make their mark in history and others are afraid that if they do what someone else did they will be seen as less than original. Military history when studied and applied to current situations prevents the military from making

mistakes that have detrimental effects. Military history also provides tactics and strategies that worked well for the military and the government in the past. If these things are repeated positive results will be the end result. Lessons learned from the past can have dramatic affects on the current and future wartime mission as well as on individual soldiers.

SGT Alvin York was the most decorated soldier of World War I. As a very religious man he was confronted with the dilemma of faith verses military commitment. Sgt York was drafted at age thirty and reported to Camp Gordon Georgia. Many saw him as the a little strange. He spent much time in prayer and reading his bible. He was excellent with a rifle but had no stomach for war. His first real battle was fought within himself. Some referred to him as a conscientious objector. He did not believe in killing and made this very clear to his commander. He often prayed to God about this situation and finally had resolve when God gave him a clear answer that war was often times justified. He then went to his commander and informed him that he had a peace about fighting and that he was fully committed to the unit's wartime mission. On October 8, 1918 at the battle of the Argonne Forest in France during a mission to secure the German Deauville rail-line Sgt York found himself in a fire fight against German machine guns. He eventually overtook the machine guns which lead to the surrender of the German Army. Sgt York did not allow his religion to keep him from the commitment he made but instead he allowed it to strengthen him so that he could courageously rise up and honor his commitment. Unfortunately today some Soldiers attempt to conveniently hide behind their religion when they don't want to deploy. Sgt York's legacy is one for all Soldiers to study, remember and apply to their lives. His courage and commitment to the United States Army was in the forefront of his mind. When others encouraged him to lean on his conscientious objector status he chose to

uphold the commitment he made to the military. Sgt York was a man who showed all Soldiers that it is possible to honorably serve God and country.

On March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1865, the Freedman's Bureau was created by Congress to help Black Americans adjust to their newly acquired freedom. The Bureau helped with health related concerns, educational and employment opportunities. Their post war focus was on assisting refugees with food, clothing and shelter. However their effort to assist former slaves with their quality of life was often hindered by opposing confederates. In many parts of the country the Freedman's Bureau did not have enough man power to enforce the laws and they lacked the much needed military presence and support. In 1866 some radical republicans attempted to expand the Freedman Bureau but it was vetoed by president Andrew Johnson (Wikipedia, 2008)

The most difficult task that the Freedman's Bureau had was assisting the former slaves with the adjustment in living there day-to-day lives. Food, clothing and shelter were always in high demand. Howard University was established to assist the Freedman's bureau. Rations were set aside for employees to feed hired former slaves but many employers simply refused to use the service provided. Only a small percentage of the food was ever used. The bureau also had a mission to assist with medical treatment of Blacks. The bureau attempted to build new clinics and provided additional medical care for Blacks. This proved to be a very difficult task. Civil authorities were unwilling to cooperate and military presence was once again lacking. There was simply not much success in this area. Many people felt that it was nearly impossible for the Freedman's Bureau to accomplish its mission without military presence and support. However, the valuable lesson here is that the difficult task of any military is to force it's will upon a

people. If the people do not will to do something it is almost impossible to make them do it by military force. For a short time the military can change the actions of a people but it cannot

change the will, hearts and minds of a people. The United States is seeing this lesson play out again in the war with Iraq. Again, it is impossible to force a will upon a people who are unwilling to change.

There is much to learn from Poncho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico in 1916. After this raid the United States launched the Mexican Expedition headed by General John J. Pershing. General Pershing pursued Villa for an entire year and was unsuccessful in capturing him. Some valuable lessons were learned from the Mexican Expedition. First of all the U. S. Troops went into unfamiliar territory. They had not properly trained for the heat and desert of Mexico. Soldiers traveled long hours during the dessert heat without adequate supplies of water. Unfamiliar with the terrain Soldiers did not know what they could and could not eat from the land. Another mistake that U.S. troops made was that they went after Poncho Villa into Mexico. They attempted to find him amongst his own people. This was virtually impossible because Poncho Villa knew the land and the people. As a result the U.S never captured Poncho Villa. Often times Soldiers violated customs of the land simply because they had not studied the culture prior to going into Mexico. It is important to study a countries culture prior to entering that country. A lack of cultural awareness coupled with a pompous attitude quickly made the U. S. Soldiers unwelcomed in Mexico. Another valuable lesson is that Soldiers must remain battle ready. Soldiers also had some distractions like alcohol and a red light district that Soldiers frequented quit often. The United States did not succeed in its mission to stop border raids and

capture Poncho Villa yet there are still valuable lessons that came out of the Mexican Expedition. Even today down range in Iraq Soldiers are not permitted to drink alcohol and sexual interactions are prohibited. It hinders the Army wartime mission and negatively affects unit readiness.

### Conclusion

Military history is very important to our military as well as to our nation. We briefly discussed some military history involving Sgt Alvin York, the Freedman's Bureau, and Poncho Villa. If lessons learned are studied and applied appropriately hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved in battles all across the world. Soldiers could see how religion can be used as a source of strength and not as a crutch for the uncommitted. As a Nation we could avoid the unnecessary expenditure and waste of billions of taxpayers' dollars. Military History affords us the opportunity to look into the past and glean from positive effects as well as negative effects. It provides the military and government an opportunity to strategize so that a desired outcome might be achieved with maximum effectiveness. As Military history is studied and the lessons learned applied appropriately the current and future wartime mission will benefit greatly.

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