

Running Head: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY OF MILITARY HISTORY

The Importance of the Study of Military History

SGM Joseph H. Wolfe III

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class # 58, R09

SGM Jose Rogers

15 January 2008

Abstract

The study of American military history and its wars will make you a better professional Soldier. You will develop a better identity for yourself as an Officer, NCO, or Soldier. Our previous wars provide us with many extraordinary examples of heroism and provides us with examples of lessons learned that directly apply to the Global War on Terrorism. Some examples are Victorio and Geronimo's ability to successfully elude the Cavalry for several years during the Indian Wars and General Pershing identifying the need for leadership training for NCOs in support of small unit tactics. By identifying past mistakes and successes, we, as professional Soldiers, can avoid the mistakes of previous wars and profit from previous successes.

The Importance of the Study of Military History

Your ability to study and analyze military history will give you a better understanding of how the Army evolved to what it is today. Understanding its successes and failures will empower you with the knowledge required to avoid repeating its mistakes. Today's professional Soldiers make critical decisions every day, while deployed, that have a direct impact on the Global War on Terrorism and the future of America's role as a superpower.

Why Study Military History

First and foremost, Army Regulation 870-5, Military History: Responsibilities, Policies, and Procedures, outlines and describes why professional Soldiers should study it. The mission of the Army Historical Program is to preserve, critically interpret, disseminate, and teach military history; provide historical advice; and stimulate historical mindedness with the Army throughout the nation (Army Regulation 870-5, 1999, p 3). Some of its goals are to preserve the memory of the Army, support leadership and development, provide military history instruction in the education and training of Soldiers, and provide historical support in the decision making process for the leadership. Professional historians or historical Officers are authorized down to the Division level in the Army.

By studying all the different facets of military history, professional Soldiers, Officers, and NCOs, will have a better understanding of why and how to go and fight its nation's wars in support of national interests. When Officers study U.S. military history in previous wars they can compare those experiences to the wars that are fought today and make sound strategic decisions on how to decisively engage the enemy and win. NCOs play a vital role in advising their Officer counterparts in making critical decisions concerning how the battle will be fought. Every day since the start of the Global War on Terrorism, NCOs are leading squad and platoon level patrols

in Iraq and Afghanistan requiring them to make critical decisions that will have a direct effect on the outcome of this war. They are also the ones that have the most influence on their Soldiers.

Meaning, how they act and treat the local populace is exactly how their Soldiers will treat them.

If you look back at the Vietnam War you can find several examples of how young Officers and NCOs tolerated the inhumane treatment of the locals by their Soldiers. We learned a lesson from this and now Officers, NCOs, and Soldiers must go through training on respecting the cultures and traditions of the people of the country that they are deploying to. This training is a must, considering that the leadership believes the key to success in Iraq and Afghanistan is based on winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Understanding Your Identity as an NCO

In the early days of the Army, NCOs were administrative managers, drillmasters, and the enforcers of camp discipline. They were the only figures of authority that had daily contact with the Soldiers. There was little or no difference between NCO pay and Soldier pay and there was a huge social gap between NCOs and Officers. As battle tactics changed so did the role of the NCO. They started taking on more roles as leaders of Soldiers during combat operations.

Up until the 1800's, NCOs were relatively uneducated. In the middle of the 1800's the Army started educating NCOs in some career fields, such as: Artillery, Medical, Infantry, and Cavalry. For years Officers warned that an educated and better paid NCO was needed as their role in the Army became more important to its success. In 1908 this finally happened, just as the strength of the NCO Corps was critically low.

At the beginning of World War I, General John J. ("Black Jack") Pershing insisted that leadership training for NCOs must be upgraded at once. This happened and at the end of the war General Pershing stated:

NCOs, as small unit leaders must love initiative and must hold ground they gained to the utmost. It often happens that a Sergeant or even a Corporal may decide a battle by the boldness with which he seizes a bit of ground and holds it (Hogan, Fisch, and Wright, 2005, p 19). The most important lesson learned from World War I was the importance of small unit tactics and small unit leadership.

World War II saw little change in NCO education. However, after the war drastic changes started taking place. The need for NCO education spurred the Army to develop the NCO academy system. It has developed into the system that the Army uses today to train NCOs for every grade they can hold. The end result is a professional NCO who leads and trains Soldiers and advises Officers on the tactical and technical aspects required to run the Army. In order to fully understand and appreciate your duties and responsibilities as a professional Soldier you must study its history.

How the Army Evolved to What it is Today

The American military system as it is known today, evolved from the militaries of the European nations. It started as state militia's defending their homelands while they established communities. The American Army has always been known as an Army of the people that takes its instructions from the government in order to protect the country's national interests.

Initially the Army helped England push the French out of North America. Since then it has used the military to gain its independence, fight a Civil War, fight the Indians, and fight a war with Mexico. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the United States started to emerge as a world power. Until then, the U.S. focused on developing the country internally and the military was primarily used in support of domestic defense.

As the country started focusing on expanding trade and naval interests overseas it was only a matter of time before the military was going to have to defend her national interests overseas. In the Pacific and the Caribbean this soon came to fruition. The Army was spread out across the U.S. in support of westward expansion and was ill prepared to support this. Initially, in places such as Cuba and the Philippines, disease problems, logistics issues, and transportation problems plagued the Army in its efforts. They soon figured out how to fix these problems and were quite successful in their efforts.

During the twentieth century, America was involved in two World Wars, Korea and Vietnam. While fighting these wars, tactics changed several times, requiring the military to constantly adapt to the different threats and the different types of warfare in the various regions they fought in. Over this period of time technology produced weapons that had greater firing distances, and were more deadly, requiring tactics to continue to change.

Army leaders must stay focused on two things; the threat of the present, and the threat of the future. By studying the history of its previous wars and the tactics that were used to fight them, it can be an Army that is better prepared to fight its nation's wars of the future.

Comparing Previous Wars to the Global War on Terrorism

By studying America's previous wars you will discover several examples of wars that are similar to the wars being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Victorio and Geronimo were two of the most famous Indian leaders during the Indian wars. The U.S. continuously signed new treaties with the Indians during the Indian Wars causing them to move several times. Victorio and Geronimo eluded capture several times by moving back and forth across the American and Mexican Border, all the while conducting raids on both sides. The Army never did capture

Victorio, he was killed by the Mexicans while camped just inside the border of their country.

Geronimo finally surrendered in 1886 and sent to Florida to live as a prisoner of war.

The U.S. Army greatly underestimated the American Indian's desire to live free on their land and their resolve in defending their way of life. This sounds very similar to the Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces operating on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. You could also compare this to the Kurdish people that are sitting on the border of Iraq and Turkey right now.

During the Philippine-American War, both countries shared a common interest in defeating Spain however; Emilio Aguinaldo wanted immediate independence for the country. We fought in the Philippines for three years. Aguinaldo never thought he could win, in fact his desire was to undermine America's will to continue the fight by harassing the American Forces. He thought that if he broke the American's will to stay the course, they would leave. In the end, the Army made peace more attractive than war to them and the war ended in 1902. This thought process could be exactly what Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces could be thinking in Afghanistan. If the Army leaves the country too soon the Taliban could end up in charge of the country again.

Historically, the American people have always preferred quick victories; they don't like drawn out wars. In fact, in Iraq, we defeated Saddam Hussein quickly; however American forces are currently in the middle of a war between the Sunni's and the Shiite's over who should be in charge of their country. Neither one wants the other to have too much power in the government.

Further study of the Marine Corps small wars, from 1898 to 1934 could possibly provide more insight to winning the hearts and minds of the people in Iraq and Afghanistan. They participated in several small wars in the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Mexico,

Guam, Samoa, China, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. They quickly discovered that winning the hearts and minds of the people was paramount in accomplishing the mission.

The Professional Soldier's Role in Shaping Military History

America's previous wars shaped military history as we know it today. Her forefathers were the ones who made decisions on the battlefield that determined the outcome of battles and wars, producing Soldiers that committed great acts of bravery, in the face of danger, that today's professional Soldiers model themselves after. From Sergeant Brown, of the 5th Connecticut Regiment, during the American Revolution, to Corporal York, of the 82nd Division, during World War I, to Staff Sergeant Braman, during the attack on the Pentagon, countless Americans have answered America's call to duty, during times of crisis. Today's professional Soldiers are the ones answering that call to duty, therefore becoming tomorrow's heroes that future Soldiers will model themselves after.

The military way of life is a culture of its own, within the American culture; that professional Soldiers must study in order to understand their role in shaping military history. Just as the leaders and heroes of the past did not realize that they were shaping military history, neither will today's professional Soldiers. The American way of life instills in its youth, the values of duty, honor, and country; no one understands this more than the American Soldier.

Opposing Point of View

Some professional Soldiers believe that they don't need to study military history because technology has changed weaponry and tactics so much that the challenges to apply lessons learned well outweigh the benefits. Still others would say that military leaders study it from day one of their career and never apply the lessons learned from the past, to the present.

Probably the best example of this is the process of downsizing the military after every major war. After the Gulf war, the Department of Defense cut the Army end strength from 780,000 to 480,000. Currently the Active duty army is approximately 512,000 and stretched very thin, fighting a war on two fronts. If you look at wars of the past they did the same thing every time. The end result is always an Army that is stretched to thin. The Soldier is currently paying the price for this by having to go on back to back deployments. Deployments place a huge strain on the Soldier and their families. Why has this lesson not been learned yet?

Conclusion

In conclusion, professional Soldiers must study military history in order to understand their identity in the military, how the Army developed into what it is today, and their role in shaping military history for the future. By studying military history you gain a better understanding of the challenges our forefathers faced as they helped shape the Army as it is known today. George Santayanna said: “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it” (Brainyquote.com). With that being said, **Be** the military history expert for your unit, **Know** your military history, and **Do** your best to be the best advisor you can be for your Officers and the best educator for your Soldiers as we help shape the history of the future.

References

- Army Regulation 870-5: Military History: Responsibilities, Policies, and Procedures.*
(1999, January). Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army.
- Hogan Jr, D. W., Fisch Jr, A. G., Wright Jr, R. K. (2005). *The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer. The Backbone of the Army.* Washington, D.C. Center of Military History
- Santayana, G. (no date). *Brainyquote.com*. Retrieved December 3, 2007 from
http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/g/george_santayana.html
- Stewart, R. W. American Military History Volume I. (2005). *The United States Army and the Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917.* Washington, D.C. Center of Military History
- Stewart, R. W. American Military History Volume II. (2005). *The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2003.* Washington D.C. Center of Military History
- United States Marine Corps. (1940). *Small Wars Manual.* Washington D.C. Sunflower University Press.