

Why the United States Army is unprepared for America's First Battle's

SGM Buford E. Noland

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Joseph E. Vargo

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## Outline

- I. Historically the United States Military is unprepared for the initial phases of conflict. In particular, the U.S. Army is unprepared, at least in the initial phases, to prosecute America's wars. This paper will examine the initial battles of three American conflicts and outline the reasons for the U.S. Army's failure to win those battles. Secondly, this paper will explore the evolution of the Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) throughout these first battles. From very humble beginnings, the NCO Corps has evolved into a respected institution known as the backbone of the Army. Lastly, we will look at the future of our Army, and the NCO Corps.
- II. Three American first battles
  - A. The battle of Bull Run during the American Civil War
  - B. The battle of the Kasserine Pass during World War II
  - C. The Battle of La Drang during the Vietnam conflict
- III. The American Army past, present, and future
  - A. The U.S. Army
  - B. The NCO Corps
- IV. Conclusion

### Abstract

History has shown time and again that the United States Military, in particular the United States Army, is unprepared for the initial phases of conflict. There are many reasons for these failures. America is a peace loving country that for most of its history has been unwilling to support a large standing, professionally trained Army. Therefore she has been overly dependent on a poorly trained, poorly disciplined, badly led National Guard for her defense. The U.S. Congress for most of its existence has been unwilling to finance a large standing professional Army for fear of that Army becoming too powerful. Lastly, the Army itself is to blame. An over dependence by a peace time Army on an Officer Corps that is promoted by seniority, favoritism, and even nepotism. In many cases this has left the Army led by incompetent officers that are only interested in furthering their own careers. The Army's NCO Corps up until the post Vietnam rebuild, has been no better. For most of its existence the NCO Corps has been mistrusted, marginalized, and powerless. Only in the last 30 years has the Army realized that a professional, competent, and empowered NCO Corps is key to an Army that is prepared to fight and win America's first Battles.

### The first Battle of Bull Run

The first battle of the American Civil War began on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1861. Known as the first battle of Bull Run in the north, or the first battle of Manassas in the south. Fought over two days in mid July in the fields around Manassas, Virginia, 25 miles south of Washington DC. Both the northern and southern Army's were green and had not been tested in battle. However, most of the senior Officers and NCOs' on both sides had fought in the Mexican / American War some twenty years earlier.

The U.S. Army held the advantage in the number Soldiers committed to battle, 35,000 to 22, 000 committed by the Confederacy (Heller, 1986). However, the professionally trained U.S. Army of the time was very small and most regular Army units were stationed in the west fighting the Indian Wars. So most Soldiers committed to this battle by the north were State Militia, 90 day volunteers, with little or no training. Worse yet, the cream of the U.S. Army Officer and NCO Corps were southerners who had quit the Army to go south and defend their homeland from northern aggression.

The Union battle plan was simple enough. The Army under BG McDowell would move south and west from the Washington DC area, defeat the Confederate Army gathered around Manassas, Virginia then take the Confederate Capital in Richmond, Virginia, thereby ending the rebellion in one simple battle. So confident were the politicians in Washington, that most, including President Lincoln, rode out to have a picnic and watch the Union Army crush the Rebels. This confidence in the Union Army

would prove to be very misplaced.

After some initial success the Union Army was stopped at Henry House Hill by Col. Thomas J. (Stone Wall) Jackson's Virginia Brigade. Col. Jackson then counter attacked and turned the Union Army's right flank. Causing the Yankees to panic, all order and discipline dissolved within the ranks of the Union Army and a head long retreat began back to Washington.

The U.S. Army's defeat that Bull Run can be summed up in words that will repeat themselves time and again throughout U.S. Military history. Over confidence by senior peace time Army Commanders that are not up to the task of Commanding an Army in the field. Over dependence on National Guard troops that are poorly trained, and poorly disciplined. Lastly, an NCO Corp that is not trusted, not Competent, and virtually powerless.

#### The Battle of the Kasserine Pass

The first major battle between U.S. and German Army's in World War II. The battle of the Kasserine Pass was fought over several days starting on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943 as a part of Operation Torch. The Allied campaign in north Africa to defeat the German Panzer Corps (Africa) commanded by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.

The U.S. Army's II Corps, Commanded by Major General (MG) Lloyd Fredendall defended the pass in an attempt to keep the Germans from braking out to the west after the German defeat at the battle of Tripoli, by the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The German Fifth Panzer Army began the attack using classic blitzkrieg tactics, well known to the British,

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but never before experienced by the American's. Within minutes, the American line broke and entire units began to retreat.

American tanks were no match for their German counterparts. American Soldiers, who were virtually untrained in desert warfare and had never had a shot fired at them in anger, broke and ran under the German assault. Worst of all, there was no command and control of American units. Any part of the command that tried to stand and fight, did so alone, without any support from higher headquarters.

The American's were pushed back over 50 miles, lost control of the Pass, lost 103 tanks, 280 vehicles, 18 field guns, 3 antitank guns, an entire anti-aircraft battery and suffered 2,546 casualties. A humiliating defeat that can be described as what happens when amateurs first meet professionals. The U.S. Army's II Corps performance can be summed up in almost the same words as the U.S. Army's performance at the battle of Bull Run. Green, untried Troops commanded by an overly confident peace time Commander who lacked the ability to command an Army in the field. The NCO Corps is as much to blame for this defeat as anyone else. Green and untried, in most cases promoted only weeks or months earlier and with virtually no leadership training. Sergeants, throughout this battle were to say the least ineffective.

Changes were made immediately after the battle. MG Fredendall was relieved along with several other senior Commanders. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, MG George S. Patton was placed in command of the II Corps. MG Patton made sweeping changes throughout II Corps that would allow that organization to regain its reputation. In fact, the U.S. II Corps would see only victory the remainder of WW II.

## The Battle of La Drang

Fought over a four day period starting the 18<sup>th</sup> of November, 1965 in the Central Highlands of the Republic of South Vietnam, the battle of La Drang is the first time the U.S. Army fought the North Vietnamese Army on a large scale. Made famous by the book and movie, *We were Soldiers once and Brave* (Moore / Galloway, 2002). This two part battle took place on two different Landing Zones (LZ), X-Ray and Albany.

The first battle fought in and around LZ X-Ray by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (BN), 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Commanded by LTC Hal Moore is considered a victory. All be it a very costly one. At 1048 hours on 14 November the 1/7 Cavalry conducted an air assault via UH1H Helicopters and occupied the LZ. The BN was attacked by the 33<sup>rd</sup>, 66<sup>th</sup>, and 320<sup>th</sup> Regiments of the North Vietnamese Army, which were well trained and well lead. The 1/7 Cavalry held the LZ under very heavy pressure and killed 634 of the enemy. Suffering 155 killed and 124 wounded before being relieved by the 2/7 Cavalry. Commanded by LTC Robert McDade. After the 1/7 Cavalry's withdrawal, 2/7 Cavalry was ordered to move from LZ X-Ray to LZ Albany. A distance of 4 miles to the north, east to allow B52 air strikes to hit the area in and around LZ X-Ray.

Forced to move the entire Battalion to the new LZ in four hours through heavy jungle.

LTC McDade chose to use a single jungle trail, forcing the battalion to move single file. leaving them very vulnerable to ambush. LTC McDade, at the head of the Battalion reached LZ Albany at 1157 hours with his Battalion strung out behind him all the way to LZ X-Ray. LTC McDade, then called his Commanders forward for a conference, leaving

his Company's leaderless. At this very vulnerable moment the North Vietnamese struck

all along the trail. Their Commanders not present, Lieutenants, and First Sergeants attempted to rally their Soldiers, however all command and control was soon lost.

Soldiers fought all along the trail individually and in small groups for the remainder of the day before the North Vietnamese finally withdrew just after dark.

2/7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry suffered 155 killed and 124 wounded, while reporting 403 enemy killed.

Troopers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry involved in the battle of La Drang were well trained and in LTC Moore's case, very well lead. Sergeants, Lieutenants and Company Commanders fought their units very well. However, the order to move from LZ X-Ray to LZ Albany and the way that move was executed, leading to an ambush that cost many American Lives, and turned a victory into a very costly draw.

*The American Army past, present, and future*

The American Army of the past has always found it hard to transition from peace to war, and in most cases has done it badly. The first ten battles outlined in America's First Battles, 1776 1965. Five were outright defeats and five were close victories won at a very high cost. The American male's unwillingness to serve in a poorly paid peace time military of the past, forced the Army to depend on the draft to fill its ranks. The American public's mistrust of a large standing military, and lastly the U.S. Congress unwillingness to pay for a large professionally trained military. Has repeatedly left our country unprepared for conflict (Heller, 1986).

The American Army of today still suffers from these same problems. Repeated deployments, in many cases units on their third and fourth tours of duty in Iraq or

Afghanistan. Along with a growing casualty list, mounting family problems at home and

a nation that is tired of the war, thus making it difficult to keep Soldiers in the ranks.

Forcing the Army to pay large bonuses to new recruits and to keep Soldiers in the Army.

However, unlike the past, today's volunteer Army enjoys the public's trust, has first rate equipment, and is paid a decent wage. Soldiers of today are better educated than ever

before. Sergeants of today receive more leadership training than Lieutenants in our Army's past. The Army of today, including the National Guard is Battle hardened, and professionally trained.

The Army of the future faces some serious challenges. Helicopters, tanks, trucks and

equipment of all types expected to last for years now requires upgrade or replacement

due to over use in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is unclear where the billions of dollars will

come from to replace this equipment. A greater concern is troop strength. The upcoming

Presidential Election has placed in doubt if the next President will be willing to maintain

troop strength at the levels required to fight the Global War on Terrorism.

#### *The NCO Corps past, present, and future*

The American NCO Corps is steeped in tradition and is something we should all be proud of. This being said, the Sergeant of the past would have problems performing as a private in today's Army. Poorly paid, poorly educated, with no leadership training and given almost no responsibility, in most cases the only thing expected from a Sergeant was to be able to supervise a work detail.

Ask an American not affiliated with the military today to name a military hero of the

Past and you may hear of a few senior officers from American's Military's past.

However it is doubtful if you will hear of one Sergeant. This is not to say there are no

Sergeant Hero's of the past, there are and they are countless. This example is only meant

to point out that our forbearers were not trusted, marginalized, and given little authority.

The American NCO of today is far different from his or her forbears. They are far better educated, motivated, and enjoy more authority than ever before. Today's NCO, from Team Leader to Sergeant Major now performs duties that were unthinkable just thirty years ago.

There are still concerns. Many within our ranks are concerned that short cuts now being made in our NCO education system will present problems down the road.

Additionally, many are concerned that we are promoting young Soldiers to Sergeant before they are ready. Lastly, and perhaps most troublesome, there are Officer's in our Army that are concerned the NCO Corp's is becoming too powerful and threaten their authority.

The American NCO of the future will face challenges, however he or she will be better

prepared than any of their forbears to face those challenges. Disaplined, educated, Equipted and empowered it will be exciting to see were the NCO of the future will take our Army.

### Conclusion

The American Military, and in particular, the Army is repeatedly unprepared to win America's first battles. To this day, the Army struggles with this problem. The Army

began Operation Iraqi Freedom with the insufficient troop strength to occupy the Country.

Troops arrived with the wrong body armor or none at all. Vehicles arrived with no armor

protection. Worst of all the Army had no clear understanding of what the mission was once the country was occupied. If the Army is to win America's next first battle, problems such as these must be addressed, or history will continue to repeat itself.

#### References

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