

Why War has utility

SGM Christopher A. Moyer

United States Military Academy

Class# 35

SGM Faithette Foreman

15 August 2009

## ABSTRACT

Why does war have utility? Why do we as Soldiers need to study military history? It seems to me that the knowledge of military history teaches us about Honor, sacrifice and the inevitability of combat...just to name a few. “Historical Mindedness” is not only what we need to pay attention to because of the jobs we occupy, it is tantamount to success in our jobs. It is not just what we do; it is indeed who we are.

History is lost in schools of today. High schools as well as higher learning in the elite academia. Try getting some kid in college, Anytown USA to tell you about the Tet offensive, and if it was an American victory or not. Chances are you will get a blank stare and a “what’s a Tet dude?”

Americans today tend to lack a basic understanding of military matters. They figure it’s the study of why one side wins and another side loses a war. Today, universities and high school students are more interested in American Idol, and a ‘give peace a chance’ rally...if it results in a French kiss from a girl/boy.

And War has its utility in life as well. The study of war reminds us that war itself is not the worst of human tragedies. Let’s start with the Bubonic plague, or “the Black Death”. From 1347-1350 the plague was rampant across Europe bringing death to 25 million people in less than 5 years.<sup>1</sup>The Spanish flu of 1918-1920 killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide. That is more than died worldwide than in all of World War I.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Gottfried, Robert, The black Death (1983) -

<sup>2</sup> Taubenberger, Jeffery, 1918 Influenza: the Mother of All Pandemics, January, 2006 -

### Why War has utility

Hitler killed some 6 million Jews and assorted political prisoners. Tojo eliminated 10 million Chinese and put some of the results in local newspapers. Mao, Pol Pot, and Stalin killed far more off the battlefield than on it. And more Americans lose their lives driving on the highway, (1,560,000-40,000 annually since 1970)<sup>3</sup> than all combat deaths (655,018) of all wars this Nation has fought in its 233 year history. <sup>4</sup>

“War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things, The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse.”

John Stuart Mill

Let us not forget that slavery, Nazism, Italian fascism, Japanese militarism and more than 40 million peoples were made free because of war. Alexander the great, Caesar, Hitler, Tojo, and Napoleon could all have been much less destructive if allies had assembled and united in time to stop them. Some still see that the Military and its history are akin to warmongering. Or some politicians still opine that the Military is for non-achievers and ner'-do-wells. History and the utility of war teach us that the misunderstanding of which will bring needless sacrifices.

Perhaps Europe forgot that inaction breeds death. Slobodan Milosevic's reign of terror killed thousands of innocent people after a decade of useless dialogue and political hand wringing. Many more examples are sprinkled throughout history. We should pay close attention or we will be victims again and again.

---

<sup>3</sup> NHTSA

<sup>4</sup> Va.gov opa

War does have a utility, a strange utility.

“War is always a matter of doing evil in the hope that good may come of it.”

B.H. Liddell Hart

To know war has utility is to have a strong grasp of military history. To know military history one must grasp a working knowledge of history itself. It is important for us all to know where we came from. The roots of our beginning, our failures, successes and how we continue to move into the future.

We must remember what happened on the battlefields of Breeds Hill, Valley Forge, Kettle Hill, and Shiloh, the wall at Fredericksburg, the importance of Little Round Top. Why the Lusitania was, the cry to war, the young boys who fought so bravely in Belleau Wood. The tragedy of Pearl Harbor, the mind numbing cold of Bastogne and the Chosin should not be forgotten. How Easy Company took the guns at Brecourt Manor,<sup>5</sup> and how Franklin Miller repulsed numerous assaults by NVA regulars to save his wounded Montagnards.<sup>6</sup> If we can use all or some of these examples of victory and defeat, then we can train our warriors better for the coming fight. We should take pride and confidence knowing that it is the Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of the past that make the manuals of today.

History and Military history are used often in Leadership manuals of the U.S.Army. Joshua Chamberlain at Gettysburg and Sergeant York in WWI are prime examples.<sup>7</sup> Using these examples shows us how different men react under varied conditions and how we must not forget

---

<sup>5</sup> Ambrose, Steven, Band of Brothers (1992)

<sup>6</sup> Miller, Franklin, Reflections of a Warrior( 1991)

<sup>7</sup> Army Leadership Manual 22-100

the actions of our Officers...Commissioned and Non-Commissioned. As senior Non-Commissioned Officers we have an obligation to train hard and smart using nightmare scenarios combined with tough, realistic training. Continue to follow the constant change of Geopolitical issues across the globe, to better know your enemy. Knowing present and past histories of a region will only enhance the Officers training ability.

Cultures of the peoples in the locations where the U.S. soldier may fight are important too. Not just the geographical places and the terrain in which we prepare for battle. If we know nothing of these places and the past battles in which we fought then those many Cemeteries are merely green fields where white crosses and white stars lie. They no longer will serve as testaments to our freedom to play golf on Sunday. They cannot serve as reminders to why we can shop in the mall, drive to the Tastee-Freeze, enjoy the day at the park with your family.

We must understand that we have a large debt we can never repay to the men who came before us. This Nation was born from a Revolution that was never tried before in the entire world. This Nation and its ideal were saved by its own Civil War. This Nation was responsible for freeing all of Europe. This Nation continues to bring freedom and democracy to peoples all across the globe. No future generation of soldiers and civilian alike should ever forget that.

What then can we do to put the study of war and military history back to the forefront of the Officers mind? We can start by abdicating the naiveté that dialogue and political good intentions can change the nature of mankind. I can find no better way to put it than this:

“Some men will always prefer war to peace; and other men, we who have learned from the past, have a moral obligation to stop them.”(Victor Davis Hanson, 2007)

## References

- Ambrose, S. (1992). *Band of Brothers*. Simon and Schuster. -
- Hanson, V. D. (2002). The Return of Military History? *National Review* . -
- Hanson, V. D. (2007). Why study War? *City Journal* . -
- Miller, F. (1991). *Reflections of a Warrior*. Simon and Schuster. -
- Stearns, P. (2008). Why study History? *American Historical Association* . -
- Underwood, L. (2000). *The Quotable Soldier*.