

Military History: An Essential Part of a Non Commissioned Officer's Success

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The instructional lead in for the Military history program (H100) at United States Army Sergeants Major Course states the following; “a thorough understanding of history can serve as a combat multiplier to light what is often a dark path ahead. History may not provide all the answers, but it may improve the ability of decision makers to ask the right questions”.

The study of Military History is an essential part of a Non Commissioned Officer’s professional development and is a key component of their success in combat. No time in the past is that study more important than today, when the contemporary operating environment demands so many fluent changes in training and missions. Those changes have placed an ever increasing responsibility on the Non Commissioned Officers of today to know and understand Military History. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan mandate the same requirement for understanding war as the Company level officers of the past. Those leaders that understand the issues of past conflicts, and past missions, will be better prepared to make decisions in combat. While Non Commissioned Officers knowledge of the past is not a substitute for experience, it is a good foundation on which to build because some things in war never change.

The Army Lesson Learned Program has been created for the purpose of collecting, analyzing, disseminating, and integrating lessons learned from recent operations and events to increase the Army’s preparedness to conduct current and future operations. This program is a grand shift from the past where those lessons learned from history would not result in a needed change of policy or practice until a conflict was long since completed. The importance of this change is also demonstrated by the contributors and consumers of this information: Platoon and Company level officers and NCOs. They are able to have access to the process and increase their efficiency as leaders by implementing the benefits of this knowledge of history.

In January of 2007 the Center for Lessons Learned (CALL) published a book detailing Techniques, Tactics, and Procedures (TTP) that had been submitted by leaders involved with Operation Iraqi Freedom. The book is simply titled, *The First 100 Days*. The book gives TTP's on Snipers, improvised explosive devices, and even cultural awareness. They had gathered this knowledge from surveys with past OIF combat veterans that had served during the past 4 years of the conflict. The book is a history lesson from the recent past designed to acclimatize Soldiers to the current conflict and increase their survivability in their first 100 days in theatre.

Lessons captured are not always relevant to the current situation. A TTP learned in the Gulf War might not be valid in Afghanistan. That being said, leaders who ignore the facts of past campaigns are fated to repeat the results. The United States has a history of letting the preparedness of the Army slack during times of peace. We have failed to learn from this lesson and have suffered for it. During the beginning of the Korean War "Task force Smith" was sent to stop the advance of the North Korean army, and to buy time for a larger force to arrive. "They lacked training, equipment, and discipline, and they were routed" (Fehrenbach, 1963).

There is an argument that the study of Military History is not needed because science, new weaponry, and globalization have altered the very rules of war, and what has happened in the past is not pertinent to the future. Technology alone can not transform the conditions that determine who wins and who loses wars. Military History makes obvious that no dominance of the defensive or the offensive, or of one sort of weapon over the other, is more than a temporary benefit gained by strategies and technologies that go unanswered while the adversaries adapt. The War on Terror has several examples of this adaptation to the other sides' advantage. We have been in a constant clash with the Insurgents in Iraq and their use of the Improvised

Explosive Device (IED). The side with the advantage is constantly changing, we add armor to our vehicles, and they make platter charges. They use remote devices to detonate the weapons, we use jamming devices to defeat their signals.

Our enemies in Iraq choose early on a strategy of counterinsurgency which gave them an advantage over our traditional large formations. Only after we looked to our past did we adapt and regain the advantage, the Counterinsurgency of the Philippine War in 1900 shows us that “the fundamentals of counterinsurgency have remained remarkably constant. Then, as now, it is a manpower-intensive operation highly dependent on effective intelligence gathering and human interaction” (McAllister, 1989, p. 12). NCOs that study the history of warfare will be better able to understand these conflicts they are currently engaged in.

Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMA) are radical change in military strategy and tactics that happen due to a new technology that causes a leap forward. Two examples would be the use of gunpowder and the airplane. The combat leaders of today must learn to understand and employ on the battlefield many advanced technologies that give u a distinct advantage over our enemies, but they do not give us all the information we require to be successful. We may still learn much from the study of past battles. Weather, terrain, and intelligence of enemy and friendly dispositions, are as important today as in the time of Alexander, or Sherman and human reactions to the demands of combat remain relatively constant”(Coakley, Jessup, 2003). Lessons in winter warfare that were learned during the battle of the Bulge in 1945 can still apply to fighting in the cold mountains of Afghanistan today. The study of the past brings us to several of the fundamental truths of war that history can always teach. The horse drawn supply train might

have taken the shape of an armored vehicle convoy, but their importance to the success of the mission, and their relationship to the battles is the same.

Transformation to a modular force consisting of Brigade Combat Teams conducting Joint Operations while operating in a contingency environment has demanded that the NCOs today have the same requirement for understanding war as the Company level officers of the past. “The experiences in the Balkans and Afghanistan and during Iraqi Freedom suggested the need to deploy smaller, nimbler, self contained units-tactical and operational "small change"-to fit contingency circumstances”(Stewart, 2005, p. 496). The Staff Sergeant of today can be expected to work with multi-national forces while leading his squad independently on a decentralized mission well outside the physical control of his company commander. Many traditional small unit leaders are performing missions that would in the past have been deemed only suited for highly trained units like the Special Forces; working with foreign civilian and military leaders, training the police.

Having an understanding of Military History, will help to prepare a leader for what he will encounter in his Military career. Professional growth must be augmented with a firm grasp of the failures and successes of leaders at all levels. The trials by fire written about in “America’s First Battles” should be lessons learned that do not need to be repeated by our capable Soldiers, due to their unknowledgeable leaders. History teaches us that we can not escape human nature; people that have learned from the past know that some individuals will chose war over peace. No matter what our good intentions are. Conflicts are started because someone believes they can win them, and a trained and ready force is the best response.

The study of Military History is an essential part of a Non Commissioned Officer's professional development and is a key component of their success in combat. History gives us an opportunity for continuous improvement in a whole range of areas. Students of History who are armed with this information are more capable of dealing with situations they themselves have not yet experienced. All Soldiers, but especially NCOs need to understand the hardships of the past in order to brace themselves and their Soldiers for them. Today we call this Battlemind. Marshal Foch wrote "no study is possible on the battlefield; one simply does what one can to apply what one knows" (Coakley, Jessup, 1978, preface).

References

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