

Skelton Ike, Summer 2000, Naval War College Review, Whispers of Warriors: The Importance of History to the Military Professional,

http://www.maxwell.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/skelton_whispers.htm

Whispers of Warriors
The Importance of History to the Military Professional

Congress must work with the armed forces to ensure the strategic flame burns bright, that the next generation of military leaders is capable and ready to assume the mantle of generalship in the traditions of General George C. Marshall and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. - [We can not afford to let the experience/history of our past leader to go to waste.](#)

When diplomacy fails, the fates of nations rest in the minds and hands of their militaries. Paradoxically, the most grave course of action a nation can undertake must be accomplished by a group unable to practice regularly its profession. Sir William Francis Butler, the noted British soldier and author of the nineteenth century, said that “the nation that will insist on drawing a broad demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards.” While armies, navies, and air forces can train, conduct exercises and war games, and shoot ordnance on instrumented ranges, for obvious reasons they cannot fight in the name of preparedness.

Why Study History? All the great commanders have benefited from a strong foundation in military history. Consider the words of a few of the masters of war:

Military history, accompanied by sound criticism, is indeed the true school of war.

—Jomini

The study of military history lies at the foundation of all sound military conclusions and practice.

—Alfred Thayer Mahan

[History is] the most effective means of teaching war during peace.

—Helmuth von Moltke (“the Elder”)

[T]he science of strategy is only to be acquired by experience and by studying the campaigns of the great captains. Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, and Frederick, as well as Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar, have all acted upon the same principles.

—Napoleon

Only the study of history is capable of giving those who have no experience of their own a clear picture of what I have just called the friction of the whole machine.

—Clausewitz

When giants of warfare—the likes of Jomini, Mahan, the elder von Moltke, Napoleon, and Clausewitz—agree so universally on the importance of history to the military officer, one must take notice.

Their message is clear. Through the study of history, military officers can gain a semblance of experience in the art of war, even in the absence of fighting. Within the written histories of battles and wars spanning three millennia reside the experiences of the best and worst to practice the military arts in combat. Through history, the whispers of our forefathers are brought to life. They tell the tales of great nations, how they rose and why they fell. They share secrets of war, from the painful, gut-wrenching decisions of commanders ordering men into harm's way, to the less frenetic and more rarefied analysis of grand strategy. They provide guidance in the fighting arts, teaching tactics and strategy. They tell about leadership, the value of inspiration and courage, and warn of the follies of recklessness or excessive caution. A student of military history can accumulate over three thousand years of fighting experience at the price of time spent reading and analyzing the whispers of warriors past.

There are four practical reasons for the military professional to master military history—to learn 1) lessons in fighting, 2) lessons in generalship, 3) lessons in innovation, and 4) the lessons of lessons learned. Beginning with lessons in fighting, each of these topics will be addressed in turn.

Lessons in Fighting. From the whispers of warriors, students of military history can gain an experiential foundation at all three levels of war—tactical, operational, and strategic. Junior officers should focus on tactics. After tactics have been mastered and as officers rise in seniority, they should also study the operational and strategic levels of war.

Tactical. FM 7-8, the Army's field manual for *Infantry Rifle Platoons and Squads*, states: "Mission tactics require that leaders learn how to think rather than what to think. It recognizes that the subordinate is often the only person at the point of decision who can make an informed decision."¹

Tactics are based on doctrine; reinforced through repetition during training, staff rides, and exercises; and are ultimately proven in combat. Knowledge of doctrine and rehearsal of tactics are essential elements in learning tactics. However, they still fall short in teaching a leader how to think in the face of the friction and fog of war, against an enemy intent on killing him, who comes to the battlefield with an entirely different set of weaponry, tactics, techniques and procedures, cultural motivation, and objectives. While still only a substitute for combat experience, through history a leader can learn the intricacies of how successful officers prevailed tactically against an adversary or, conversely, why they failed. More importantly, a reader of history can learn the background behind tactics and understand their development, allowing him to execute them in the proper context or innovate in the face of dynamic change. In short, a reader of military history learns how to think about tactics rather than what to think.

General George S. Patton, one of America's great tacticians, was an avid reader of history. He studied tactics intensely, in concert with learning everything he could of potential adversaries. As early as 1909, while still a cadet at the Military Academy, Patton wrote in his personal notebook:

In order for a man to become a great soldier . . . it is necessary for him to be so thoroughly conversant with all sorts of military possibilities that when ever an occasion arises he has at hand without effort on his part a parallel. To attain this end . . . it is necessary . . . to read military history in its earliest and hence crudest form and to follow it down in natural sequence permitting his mind to grow with his subject until he can grasp without effort the most abstruse question of the science of war because he is already permeated with all its elements.²

By the time World War II erupted, Patton was tactically primed and ready. As Sun Tzu instructed—“Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril”—Patton studied his adversaries and their tactics as a matter of course. He maintained his study of the enemy during the conduct of campaigns.

The 1944 breakout from Normandy illustrates this point. Bad weather threatened to postpone an armywide general offensive against the Saar-Moselle triangle. When the time for the “go, no-go” decision came, Patton stuck to his order to attack. However, he fretted over his decision. In his diary he wrote: “Woke up at 0300 and it was raining like hell. I actually got nervous and got up and read Rommel’s book, *Infantry Attacks*. It was most helpful, as he described all the rains he had in September, 1914, and also the fact that, in spite of the heavy rains, the Germans got along.”³ After learning that the Germans had managed in equally dreadful weather during World War I, Patton was revitalized.

Tactical lessons abound in military history. A study of William Fetterman’s massacre in 1866 near Lodge Trail Ridge in Wyoming yields the fundamentals of the ambush from its greatest practitioners, the American Indians. The 1763 battle of Bushy Run, pitting American rangers and British troops against the Indians, provides not only a daring example of how to neutralize an ambush but also of how a complete envelopment and certain rout can be turned into a victory via a bold counterattack. The Revolutionary War battle at Cowpens in 1781 teaches a tactical application of the layered defense, coupled with the importance of matching the tactic to the terrain and capabilities of the troops. The VII Corps’s textbook flanking of the Iraqi defense in DESERT STORM, reminiscent of Stonewall Jackson’s smashing success against Joseph Hooker’s right flank at Chancellorsville in 1863, provides students of military tactics with proven examples of the flanking maneuver. Those who study and analyze such historical examples gain vicarious battlefield experience and also learn how to think about tactics.⁴

Operational. In addition to learning how to think about operations, the student of military history can learn warfare principles and enduring warfare themes through study at the operational and strategic levels of war. As Sir A. P. Wavell, British field marshal and viceroy of India, said in his lectures to officers, “The real way to get value out of the study of military history is to take particular situations, and as far as possible, to get inside the skin of a man who made a decision, realize the conditions in which the decision was made, and then see in what way you could have improved on it.”

General Douglas MacArthur understood operational art and also the principle of maneuver. His September 15, 1950, landing at Inchon—deep behind North Korean lines, culminating in a hammer-and-anvil decimation of communist forces between Seoul and Pusan—stands as one of the most brilliant and daring operations in the annals of warfare.⁵

MacArthur had firsthand combat experience to draw from in crafting the Inchon-Seoul campaign. He had orchestrated eighty-seven amphibious assaults in the Pacific campaign against the Japanese during World War II. MacArthur, however, also drew from history. As Army Chief of Staff in 1935, he advised that the military student “extends his analytic interest to the dust-buried accounts of wars long past as well as those still reeking with the scent of battle” to “bring to light those fundamental principles, and their combinations and applications which, in the past, have been productive of success.”

MacArthur operationalized the words of Karl von Clausewitz, written 118 years earlier: “A swift and vigorous transition to attack—the flashing sword of vengeance—is the most brilliant point of the defensive.”

Strategic. Strategy is the domain of top-level decision makers, where military operations join with policy, politics, and national objectives. It requires a comprehensive understanding of national objectives and all means of national power—military, diplomatic, and economic—as the precursor to linking ends with means. Military history provides lessons in applied strategy. Strategies employed in the conduct of war can be evaluated in terms of actual outcomes.

America's most renowned naval thinker, Alfred Thayer Mahan, said about strategy: "As in a building, which, however fair and beautiful the superstructure, is radically marred and imperfect if the foundation be insecure—so, if the strategy be wrong, the skill of the general on the battlefield, the valor of the soldier, the brilliancy of victory, however otherwise decisive, fail of their effect."

Mahan's words prophetically describe Germany's failure in World War II against Russia. Germany's generals performed brilliantly. Her soldiers fought bravely and with great skill. Through blitzkrieg tactics, the Germans won many decisive victories in battle. Yet, all came to naught for an ill-conceived strategy.

The roots of Germany's strategic problems can be traced back to the interwar years, when, paradoxically, they began a great military renaissance. After World War I, General von Seeckt, chief of the German army command from 1920 to 1926, began a reformation of the German army, intent on correcting many of its World War I deficiencies. He began with training. He pushed the Army to adopt maneuver tactics, setting the stage for blitzkrieg. He built an effective, independent-thinking noncommissioned officer corps. Most importantly, he transformed officer training into officer education. Officers learned the specifics of their branch, including tactics and weaponry. They also studied subjects common to all branches, as well as military history. Many scholars, however, have criticized the otherwise stellar German officer training and education program for its lack of attention to grand strategy, politics, and economics.⁶ The Wehrmacht felt that strategy was beyond its purview—instead, it focused on operational art.

The decades of dedication to the study of tactics, operations, and military history nonetheless paid off when World War II erupted. Germany fielded an army with officers who were masters of tactics and operations. Not surprisingly, they prevailed at the tactical and operational levels of war. However, their strategic prowess was not equal to their expertise in operational art. They left strategic decisions up to their commander in chief, Adolf Hitler.

By the time the Germans invaded Russia in June of 1941, Hitler was totally enamored with the blitzkrieg. After decisive blitzkrieg victories over Poland and France, he was convinced that the Red Army would quickly fold its tent once Operation BARBAROSSA began. But Hitler failed to grasp the strategic differences between a war in Europe and a war in Russia. Russia was different—bitter cold in the winter, opening to the east in a widening expanse that had swallowed the likes of Napoleon. Russia would once again trade space for time, which, coupled with her numerical superiority and fierce fighting spirit in defense of her homeland, would ground the lightning attack. Even with blitzkrieg tactics and great valor from its soldiers, the Wehrmacht failed to win Russia. Hitler would have done better to listen to the warning whispers of Napoleon.

A student of strategic history learns why Pericles' defensive strategy failed against the Spartans. He better understands the failure of the Confederate strategy to demoralize the North and entice European intervention against General Winfield Scott's Anaconda strategy.⁷ The military scholar learns the conditions that necessitated a "Germany First" strategy during World War II and to appreciate the economic and diplomatic sides of war, as evidenced by the success of the containment strategy used against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Lessons in Generalship. Generalship refers to the military skill of a high commander. In addition to knowledge of strategy, operations, and tactics, great generalship requires personal courage in the face of danger, the ability to inspire and move armies and fleets, and the ability to weigh risks and remain clearheaded in the face of chaos.⁸ Military history provides a wealth of case studies in generalship.

Leadership. While the study of the campaigns of the great captains will yield lessons in fighting, the study of the great captains themselves can augment a military officer's knowledge of leadership. Their courage in the face of fire, their inspirational exhortations, their bold and audacious actions, forever stand as leadership examples, no matter the era or service affiliation.

The leadership styles of the great generals and admirals have been as different as their names and personalities. From soft-spoken to loud and booming, from conceptual thinkers to detailed planners, leaders have varied greatly in character and leadership styles. Although their styles have defied condensation into a universal set of personality traits, students of military history can hone their own styles from study of great captains with styles similar to their own. From experience forged in battle, their counsel on leadership is as important a part of their legacy as their results in battle.

Superior leadership and martial wisdom alone do not complete the skill required for generalship. In combination with leadership, pervasive knowledge of strategy and tactics, and the trust and confidence of subordinates, the great captains also knew how to take appropriate risks. The study of military history provides case studies in risk calculation in which the gravest of stakes were on the line. As the great humanist Erasmus said, "Fortune favors the audacious." This statement applies to all of the great captains. Contrarily, hardship curses the reckless and overly cautious.

The Audacious. Napoleon described Hannibal as "the most audacious of all, probably the most stunning, so hardy, so sure, so great in all things." Hannibal's crossing of the Alps to attack the Romans in Italy, for which he is principally known, stands as perhaps the most audacious act in all of military history. The trek was not without its costs. Hannibal lost almost half his original force of forty-six thousand men and all but a few of the thirty-eight elephants he started with. Nonetheless, Hannibal's crossing of the Alps also had its payoffs. Hannibal achieved a string of military successes against superior odds, culminating in one of the most storied battles of all time—the battle of Cannae.

Two Roman double-consular armies met Hannibal on open ground near Cannae. The Romans outnumbered Hannibal's forces and looked to outflank Hannibal on both sides. Hannibal aligned his troops in a crescent formation, with the wings curved away from the Roman lines. The Romans attacked the Carthaginian infantry center, which gave way before them, allowing the Roman infantry to encircle them. The Roman infantry, sensing victory, closed in for the kill. On the wings, however, the Carthaginian cavalry had defeated the Roman cavalry and maneuvered to turn the crescent formation inside out to envelop the Roman infantry. Hannibal's army slaughtered the Roman armies. Hannibal had audaciously taken on a superior force and defeated it with a double-envelopment maneuver that is still studied today.

The Cautious. General "Fighting Joe" Hooker at Chancellorsville serves as an example of how excessive caution can turn an otherwise brilliant commander into a beaten man. In the spring of 1863, the Confederates held twenty-five miles of unbroken, fortified lines in Virginia, from Port Royal to Banks Ford. Robert E. Lee still held Marye's Heights in Fredericksburg, scene of Ambrose Burnside's earlier thrashing. Hooker realized that in spite of his two-to-one superiority over the Army of Northern Virginia, another attack on Fredericksburg would end with the same devastating results. Instead, Hooker planned to flank Lee's army by an upstream crossing of the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers with three corps, while holding Lee in place with forty thousand men at Fredericksburg. The plan proceeded

smoothly until Union forces began to encounter resistance leaving the Wilderness toward Fredericksburg. Thanks to J. E. B. Stuart's cavalry probes, Lee had caught wind of Hooker's plan and sent fifty thousand men to take on Hooker. Lee, an audacious general in his own right, dangerously split his force again, sending Stonewall Jackson's corps to flank Hooker's right side. With Lee's forces split, Hooker had an opportunity to counterattack and crush the Confederate forces. Instead, Hooker lost his nerve and cautiously ordered a withdrawal to Chancellorsville. With that order, Hooker handed over the reins of initiative to Lee, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

The Reckless. Everyone knows the story of Custer's last stand and his headlong reckless rush after the Indians. Another, lesser-known Indian battle, the battle of Blue Licks, also serves to highlight the difference between reckless and audacious action. In August 1782, a group of 182 Kentucky militiamen, led by Colonel John Todd and including members of the Boone family, was in hot pursuit of Indians who had attacked an American fort.⁹ One officer, Major Hugh McGary, advised Colonel Todd to wait for reinforcements. Todd rebuked McGary for his timidity, a scorn that did not sit well with the hotheaded company commander.

During the pursuit, Daniel Boone noticed the Indians were concealing their numbers by sharing tracks, yet making the trail very easy to follow. Boone smelled an ambush by a force he estimated at five hundred Indians. The rangers caught up to the Indians at the Blue Licks. Several Indian warriors showed themselves at the top of the rocky hilltop. Boone knew the terrain. At the top of the hilltop were wooded ravines that could shield an Indian force from view. He advised breaking off the pursuit. McGary, still stinging from Todd's previous insult, called Boone a coward. He leapt onto his horse, yelling "Them that ain't cowards follow me," and recklessly charged into the river toward the Indians. Colonel Todd and the rest of the rangers followed. The Indians were indeed waiting in ambush, just as Boone feared. The rangers suffered a devastating defeat, in which Daniel Boone lost his son, Israel.¹⁰ Rather than provide inspiration at the decisive moment, McGary had recklessly incited a charge outside of the proper context.

Inspiration. Military history smiles most brightly on its most brilliant generals who were also monuments to inspiration. American military history has many proud examples of inspirational leadership. John Paul Jones revitalized his badly beaten crew in the battle between the HMS *Serapis* and the *Bon Homme Richard* with his "I have not yet begun to fight" reply to the British call for surrender. Major General Anthony C. McAuliffe's simple yet defiant reply of "Nuts!" to the German demand for surrender at Bastogne steeled not only the hearts of the defending 101st Airborne and 10th Armored Divisions but also the rest of the American army in northwest Europe.¹¹ Inspirational words coupled with courage, and the strong will of a great captain, can turn the tide of battle. They can move men to victory against superior odds, just as Lord Horatio Nelson's signal that "England expects that every man will do his duty" did for his fleet on October 21, 1805, at the battle of Trafalgar.

Study of the great captains yields the context and timing of tide-turning remarks and shows the power of inspiration through the force of their results. While few officers will ever find themselves in situations like those of Jones off Flamborough Head, McAuliffe in Bastogne, or Nelson at Trafalgar—with fewer still the headiness to articulate such elegant, fiery prose in the midst of carnage—strong-willed officers must still be able to buttress the fighting spirit of their troops and move them to action. Inspiration can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Inspiration can also result from deed and attitude rather than words. In Lord Moran's *The Anatomy of Courage*, Surgeon Commander McDowell provides a compelling account of inspirational leadership, while also noting its personal toll on the leader:

I saw the Captain of a ship drinking a cup of tea on the bridge in the course of dive-bombing attacks that had gone on all day. While he was drinking the lookout reported “Aircraft on the starboard bow, sir.” He did not even look up. At “Aircraft diving, sir,” the Captain glanced up only. “Bomb released, sir,” and the Captain gave the order “Hard a-starboard,” and went on drinking his tea until the bomb hit the water nearby. The reaction to this episode was a kind of hero-worship on the part of everyone who saw it. When the bombing had ceased the Captain went down to his cabin and when he was alone he wept.

Courage. Generalship requires courage—the strength to persevere in the face of fear. Of all the military virtues, it is the most prized and highly rewarded. No man knows how he will react to the stresses of combat until actually tested in battle. More likely than not, he will grapple with his own fear of death, while trying his best to present a mask of courage. History whispers the accounts of the great captains, who sometimes shared the fact that they too had to overcome personal fear in the face of combat. In a March 25, 1943, letter to his wife, Beatrice, Patton admitted, “I still get scared under fire. I guess I will never get used to it, but I still poke along.” Untested warriors can take solace in the fact that fear is normal, a precondition to courageous action.

Commanders must also have the moral courage to do what is right in spite of popular sentiment or even orders. The whispers of the 109 civilians massacred at the Vietnamese village of My Lai at the orders of Lieutenant William Calley on March 16, 1968, still remind us of a higher duty always to do what is right.

Lessons in Innovation. We must stay tuned to the whispers of history—that they not be drowned out by the crescendo of the present. As Sir Julian Corbett noted, “The value of history in the art of war is not only to elucidate the resemblance of past and present, but also their essential differences.” The development of the German blitzkrieg between World War I and World War II illustrates Corbett’s insight.

World War I defensive victories in battles such as Verdun, as opposed to the slaughter of French soldiers in offensive operations, led the French to believe that an impenetrable Maginot Line would protect the French from future aggression. The “lesson learned” by the French was right, that in World War I the defense dominated. The Germans learned the same lesson. But, whereas the French adopted the lesson, the Germans adapted to it.

At the close of World War I, the Germans had some success with their elite “stormtroop” units in overcoming the stalemate of static trench warfare. They studied stormtroop tactics, looking for ways to improve them. While the stormtroop units were able to take advantage of surprise and speed to overcome enemy defensive positions, they still were short of the mobility required to take advantage of their gains. During the interwar years following World War I, the Germans developed the blitzkrieg concept, a mobile form of warfare that combined close air support with tanks and mechanized infantry, to shift the advantage back to the offensive.

Lessons in Lessons Learned. History teaches that every war is unique. “Lessons learned” typically focus on what worked—and what did not—in the last conflict. History is replete with examples of militaries staying with successful technology and doctrine from previous conflicts only to suffer disastrous results in the next.

History also teaches that there are no silver bullets in warfare. Multiple means are necessary to address a spectrum of conflict that continues to expand with each evolution and revolution in warfare. The debate over the utility of the atomic bomb after the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a case in point. After the surrender of the Japanese in World War II, air extremists proclaimed that the atomic

bomb rendered all other weapons and forces obsolete.¹² They argued that the dropping of the bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki heralded the nuclear age, in which traditional forms of power projection—to include the Army, Navy, and Marines—were relics of the past. The atomic bomb could do it all—the nation merely needed to invest in bombers and A-bombs. An acrimonious debate culminated in 1949 with a special House Armed Services Committee investigation.¹³

The committee report debunked the myth of the “one-weapon, easy-war concept”; it was further underscored when the North Koreans attacked across the thirty-eighth parallel on June 25, 1950. Strategic bombing with atomic weapons was simply not an option. The Korean War was a bloody conflict in which ground forces, supported by air and sea power, were the final arbiters.

Conclusion. Serious study of history is essential to the development of exceptional military professionals. Napoleon, on his way to exile at Saint Helena, probably summed it up best in referring to his own son’s education: “My son should read and meditate often about history; the only true philosophy. And he should read and think about the great captains. This is the only way to learn about war.”

On a personal note, I still have my father’s hat. I no longer wear it; even so, I know the whispers of the past still reside within it. I remember their lessons. My father’s hat reminds me. . . .

Notes

1. U.S. Army Dept., *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, Field Manual 7-8 (Washington, D.C.: 22 April 1992), chap. 2, "Operations."
2. Martin Blumenson, *Patton: The Man behind the Legend, 1885–1945* (New York: William Morrow, 1985).
3. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1940–1945* (New York: Da Capo, 1996).
4. To find out more about these battles, the following readings are recommended: Roy E. Appleman, "The Fetterman Fight," in *Great Western Indian Fights*, ed. Potomac Corral of the Westerners (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1960, repr. 1966), chap. 10; Mark M. Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York: David McKay, 1966); Thomas Fleming, "The Cowpens," *Military History Quarterly*, Summer 1989, pp. 56–67; Victor Davis Hanson, "Cannae," *Military History Quarterly*, Summer 1990, pp. 60–5; Alberto Bin, Richard Hill, and Archer Jones, *Desert Storm: A Forgotten War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998); and Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).
5. For more on the Korean War, see T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1998).
6. James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992), pp. 75–96.
7. Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Free Press, 1984), p. 161.
8. Napoleon advised that "the first quality for a commander in chief is a cool head, which receives a correct impression of things. He should not allow himself to be confused by either good or bad news. The impressions which he receives successively or simultaneously in the course of a day should classify themselves in his mind in such a way as to occupy the place which they merit, for reason and judgment are the result of the comparison of various impressions taken into consideration. There are men who, by their physical and moral make-up, create for themselves a complete picture built upon a single detail. Whatever knowledge, intelligence, courage and other good qualities such men may have, nature has not marked them for command of armies or for direction of great operations of war."
9. Isaac Newton Skelton III and Earl Franklin Skelton, *Ike, This Is You* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1995), pp. 132–41.
10. The author's great-great-great grandfather, Squire Boone, was wounded in the thigh during the battle.
11. S. L. A. Marshall, *Bastogne* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1946).
12. Bertram Vogel, "A Reply to the Extremists," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1947, pp. 545–7.

13. J. D. Hittle [Lt. Col., USMC], "Korea: Back to the Facts of Life," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, December 1950, pp. 1289–97.