

Running head: History Essay

History that Matters

MSG Michael D. Dodson

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Foreman

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### Abstract

Many of the historical highlights of the United States are connected in one way or another to military conflict. Most of those are well documented, detailing what decisions were made by whom and what resulted from the decision. Some of those decisions are very similar to the ones being made today. Furthermore, some decisions were made during peacetime but had lasting effects on actual combat. These lessons are valuable tools that can benefit the entire chain of command. Many good historical examples can be applied to modern combat operations. However, this essay will limit the topic to discussion of the Civil War, World War I, military draw-downs, and the Global War on Terrorism.

## History that Matters

For the past 7 years the Global War on Terrorism has kept the majority of our Armed Forces extremely busy. At the end of the duty day, both in Garrison or in the field, there is just not a lot of time left for military studies. Those remaining hours that our troops have left are precious to them. Given their increasingly demanding schedule, it may or may not make sense for our military leaders to dedicate some of these precious hours of their time to the study of military history.

In our modern society, individuals often talk about how they learn from their own mistakes. How they made a decision which produced poor results and now they pledge not to make the same mistake again. The pledge is common and it is heard from both the old and the young. Yet, these same individuals are seldom heard talking about the decisions of others. They do not know it yet, but these military professionals can reap significant rewards by studying military history and applying proven techniques to our contemporary operating environment.

### Civil War Tactics in World War I

It is an undisputed and commonly known fact that the Civil War has been the American Soldiers deadliest conflict. Over 600,000 American Soldiers died on the field of battle by the end of the Civil War in 1865. Yet, with all of that carnage there were very few decisive battlefield victories. The human death toll was astronomical and it all happened without the use of the smart bombs and other advanced long-range weapons that we have today. How did such activity come to pass? The answer can be found in the inappropriate use of linear tactics. In the early eighteenth century linear tactics were a standard military practice. “Assault troops advanced in line, two ranks deep, with cadenced steps, stopping to fire volleys on command and finally rushing the last few yards to pierce the enemy with a bayonet charge” (Tactics, n.d.). This scene is played out

over and over in movies such as “The Patriot”. Furthermore, these practices continued into the Civil War even though the introduction of the rifled barrel caused for a change in tactics. The rifled barrel was far superior to any of its smooth bore predecessors. It brought drastic changes to the battlefield and enhanced the lethality of the individual Soldier. This “would have two main effects in the American Civil War: it would strengthen the tactical defensive and increase the number of casualties in the attacking force” (Tactics, n.d.). These new and improved weapons allowed for greater accuracy and increased range. Defenders could inflict major damage on an advancing line of troops at a range of several hundred yards or more. The military leaders of that era began to disperse their formations to counter the new defensive threat but they continued to rely on linear tactics through the end of the Civil War (Tactics, n.d.).

Like the Civil War, World War I brought with it new and improved weaponry. Chemical weapons and automatic weapon systems provided military forces with more firepower than ever before. However, there was no matching increase in unit maneuver capability. This led to the rapid creation of extensive trench networks on both sides and the area between the two opposing trench-lines became a no-man’s land of death and despair. Unfortunately, the use of linear-tactics became commonplace once again. Week after week, thousands of Soldiers were gunned down by German machine gun fire. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division from Texas and Oklahoma was one such unit involved in a linear attack (Brager, 2002). After one particular battle charge an enemy Soldier recalled some of the issues which plagued the advance of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. “He explained the problems, somewhat sympathetically, as due to the 36<sup>th</sup> being under fire for the first time, and the tactics of advance – battalions in line – leading to confusion” (Brager, 2002). This was but one example of a failure to learn from the combat experiences of others.

#### Military Drawdown

World War II brought unprecedented levels of death and destruction to the world. For the United States it was an event which called for many sacrifices both abroad and at home. Naturally, after years of sacrifice the American people were ready to forget about wars for a time and go about their lives in a more peaceful manner. Hence, there was a drastic and rapid reduction in both military spending and personnel strength, resulting in “going from a force of 12 million to a congressionally mandated force strength of 1,070,000 from 1945 to 1947” (Fukumitsu, 1996). This new force was a mere shell of the previous military force with few experienced troops to fill the ranks, including the units on occupation duty in Japan. These short staffed and under-supported units were left to occupy Japan but received very little in the way of mission support and training even though they were the main US presence in the Far East and were to be first responders to any crisis in Korea. While the US force structure withered, the North Korean forces grew stronger. (Fukumitsu, 1996). When North Korea attacked South Korea the US had but one response to slow the North Korean advance, it was an undermanned, undertrained and undersupplied contingent from the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (totaling just 406 Soldiers) led by LTC Charles Smith. In the early morning hours of 5 July 1950, the Soldiers of Task Force Smith came face to face with an extremely capable and overwhelming North Korean force (Fukumitsu, 1996). The American Soldiers of Task Force Smith fought bravely but proved to be no match for the large North Korean invasion.

Some forty years after the post World War II drawdown there was another drawdown. This time it was the post cold-war drawdown. During this drawdown the active duty force was reduced by nearly 40 percent, going from 2.1 million personnel to 1.3 million personnel. To facilitate the drawdown, many of the nations experienced career Soldiers were offered financial incentives (Hartley, Sandler, 1995). The incentives worked and the active duty force was quickly

reduced, but a threat was looming just around the corner. The United States was attacked on its own soil just a few years after the final drawdown was complete. Hence, the Global War on Terrorism began. Almost immediately there were calls for additional resources, more linguists and more troops. Unfortunately the Department of Defense had no choice but to enact a strict stop-loss policy and hire contractors to fill the gaps. The results of the post-cold war drawdown still haunt the US military. After seven years of war, a number of Soldiers are still on stop-loss while the Pentagon struggles to find adequate troops for deployment. Linguists are still in dire need and many mid-term Soldiers are jumping ship. The nation is still trying to recover from the negative effects of a military drawdown. Regrettably, the lessons of Task Force Smith were ignored, and the modern day Soldier is paying the price.

#### Recent History

History does not have to be ancient to be worthwhile, nor does it have to involve complex missions with large numbers of troops. Some of our best history lessons took place in the past few years and involve small elements. On 27 March 2003 the 507<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company was travelling through Iraq as part of a large 600 vehicle convoy. After a period of 60-70 hours of continuous driving and limited sleep the unit found itself off of its intended convoy route. A single navigational error took the unit off the planned route and through the Iraq city of An Nasiriyah. As the unit tried to make its way back to its original planned route it fell under attack. The Soldiers of the 507<sup>th</sup> fought back as best they could, but they were hindered by a combination of vehicle issues and weapons malfunctions. A total of 33 Soldiers, riding in multiple vehicles, drove through the city that day. Hours later 11 were killed, 9 were wounded and 11 were captured (Attack on the 507<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company, n.d.). Some questions still remain and some may never be answered. Maybe the outcome would have been different if the

weapons did not malfunction. Regardless of the answers the facts remains that this action will always serve as a reminder to all service-members that the worst case scenario is just a right turn away and you must always be ready for action.

On 20 March 2005 elements of the 617<sup>th</sup> MP Company were escorting a supply convoy in Iraq when the convoy came under attack. SGT Leigh Ann Hester reacted instantly by pushing through the kill zone and assuming a position on the enemy flank. SGT Hester then dismounted her vehicle and assaulted a trench line with grenades and direct fire while SPC Ashley Pullen provided suppressive fire. The battle resulted in a victory for the US forces and a Silver Star for SGT Hester (Wood, 2005). More importantly, it showed what a well trained and prepared team is capable of doing.

#### Counter Arguments

Some may argue that historic battles fought with primitive weapons offer nothing to today's high tech military professional. They might also argue that every combat situation is different and that you cannot compare old to new. However, history shows that we can actually learn from the past. Technology does indeed change but sound military principles hold strong. Soldiers like SGT Hester are out there proving that decisive military victory is still possible

#### Conclusion

The battlefield decisions made by our predecessors, from the Civil War thru present day, and the impact of those decisions, have provided us with hundreds of valuable lessons which can assist us in the planning and execution of modern military operations. The lessons learned from the age old use of linear tactics, improper military draw-downs, and even our recent history; prove that military professionals can reap significant rewards by studying military history and applying proven techniques to a contemporary operating environment.

## References

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