

The importance of military professionals studying military history

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Each time the United States was drawn into a major conflict, it was at the low point of our military band of excellence. This was evident when Pearl Harbor occurred on December 7th 1941 and again during the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001. Because both times our military was in the middle of resetting and refitting, there was less emphasis placed on leadership development through studying military history. Leading soldiers does not change from one unit to another, while the missions may vary, the responsibilities will not differ between a combat arms unit or a combat service support unit. Studying and learning from historical military events is just one way a leader in any organization can improve not only themselves but the unit and its future leaders.

Leadership is part of a process that enables an organization to maintain proficiency and mastery in whatever their warrior task may be. The development of leaders is continuously performed through honest self-assessments and outside assessments of a leader's skills, knowledge, and attributes. This can only be achieved by a thorough look at and understanding of the past. After identifying areas of specific challenges or success, reviews of these events will reveal ways to improve and pitfalls to avoid in the future. Failure to commit to this process will cause a breakdown in the maintenance of proficiency and the mastery of certain warrior task. A leader must fully believe in the mission, the Soldiers they are leading, and themselves in order to ensure the success of the mission and ultimately, the survival of the members of the unit. This strong belief can only come about with determination, enthusiasm for life, and a desire not to relive the failed past.

Some schools of thought may maintain that military history does not present itself as the way to ensure success. The reign of Genghis Khan can be looked at as an example of this. It is recorded that he was not a military history scholar. This was probably looked at as a reason for his overwhelming success as a tactical and combatant leader. Genghis Khan's enemies most surely saw him

as possessing the characteristics of being fearless and unpredictable as a commander. Khan's continued success on the battlefield against his enemies and invaders still would leave his army susceptible to catastrophic failure from within the ranks. This was because leaders had nothing to relate success or failure to; since it appeared that they were the only ones making history. The thought that not studying military history is good is further debased with a current example. The war in Afghanistan was on a path of escalation as we began to receive more attacks and the sustainment of casualties than normal in the treacherous mountains. This is as a result in the change in the application of our battlefield tactics. These Soldiers were trained by US forces during their fight with the Soviet Union. These fighters are the disillusioned Mujahidin fighters forming what we now know today to be the Taliban. It may have been the lack of studying military history which provided the Taliban an early tactical wartime advantage. The initial invasion of Afghanistan demonstrated that our military leaders may have looked at the Middle Eastern conflict as one major conflict and not several different ones throughout the region. The only thing that lends itself to being a common thread among these Soldiers is perhaps their historic religious connection.

It stands to reason that the success or failure of Afghan engagements was a direct correlation between the knowledge level of military history of a Middle Eastern country in a combatant theater. This was even more evident in what appeared to be the overuse of the overwhelming combat weapons technology, commonly referred to as the "shock and awe". The use of bunker bombs and unmanned aerial vehicles are just two examples of how the human element had been removed from the historical application of military knowledge and tactics left our forces vulnerable. After some thought and changes in the chain of command, you will discover there are leaders who have studied military history as well as the history of the combatant theater. This advantage exactly what some Soldiers need to motivate them to review and reflect military history.

While the Army has been, or is often called a corporation, the process of developing its leaders is constant and adaptive in nature. This creates a culture of transformation that is utilized by many leaders which ultimately compete for resources and current doctrinal knowledge. That is where the difference is between a corporation and our Army. A corporation will wait for change to happen from the outside. Our Army on the other hand creates rapid change from within. Planning, preparing and executing training is paramount in setting the example for Soldiers to adapt to the rapid changes. Utilization of historic data provides so much more to be learned from a leader's action than what is said. In the pages of history books and archives, leader's actions are revealed by what they have accomplished or failed to accomplish. Rarely is something revealed to develop future leaders from what a leader has merely said. The leader must have lived the example. Military history documents all aspects of military mission from the conception of the mission to the end state and conclusion of the final outcome. A leader can use this compilation of knowledge and facts for success, simply by ensuring that all leader and Soldier expectations are clear and understood from the beginning. With this understanding a leader is then prepared to assist the Soldiers in meeting and maintaining standards. The recorded deeds of a revered or respected leader will only serve to validate any words spoken, further shoring up the ability to lead Soldiers

Army leaders constantly add to their knowledge, skills, and attributes. This is done through seeking opportunities to further their education by studying the past. These leaders will often seek challenges that also force them to grow and mature, and finally, seek mentorship. "When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end with dysfunction" (Heifetz, 14). These characteristics are not singled out for combat arms leaders alone and are associated with all aspects of leadership challenges. Historically during peace time, we have technical challenges trying to apply current leadership know-how to futuristic weapons platforms or equipment models. This becomes challenging when drawn into combat, because then our leaders are forced to be adaptive in learning new ways to combat the enemy in the attempt to minimize loss of

equipment, and personnel. Regardless of a Soldier parent organization, Soldiers want a leader that will inspire them, are visionary in thought, know their job, and overall is honest. These expectations are not unrealistic and often are embodied in everything that an Army leader does. This phenomenon is found in just about every form of military history as the pivotal point of military leader success.

The Army is structured in an organizational manner that forces its leaders to be effective and act decisive. Making decisions utilizing different decision making practices is what gives foundation to the stronger leaders. The development process is ongoing and includes both personal and professional development. "The corporate sector views personal development as somewhat soft. And there is almost a sense in the private sector that you're either a leader or you're not." (Hesselbein, 3) Leadership success depends on the quality of training prior to the execution of the mission. The leader who stands by and waits in peace time, will not take the initiative in combat. This requires a level of personal development and it comes in many forms that lead to the professional development of our leaders. This process is deeply ensconced in the physical conditioning at every level of leadership. A leader must be able to endure the physical hardships of combat and one can rely on military history to determine what those hardships may be in order to overcome them. A leader's bearing and disposition goes much further than just looking like a Soldier. They have to set the example and maintain bearing in attitude, mannerisms and conduct, both on and off duty. Thorough reviews of history assists good leaders in paying attention to the minute details, as evidenced by leaders being the best at their skills, knowing and doing their jobs. Studying the detailed history also enables good leaders to provide the necessary and effective training for Soldiers. A successful leader can make an honest attempt to achieve and often exceed the standards in all endeavors. Personal devotion is desirable and can only be achieved by treating Soldiers fairly justly and impartially. History will show that being loyal, honorable and demonstrating integrity are nonnegotiable.

“In today’s society, individuals seek leadership positions to enhance their social status, gain power or to simply please the desires of their parents. These reasons are insufficient to sustain a leader when the bullets are thick and soldiers are dying.” (Howe, 51). Leaders who are loyal solely for personal gains are the leader that is unreliable, undesirable and untrustworthy. These objectionable traits will not develop Soldiers that are confident, motivated and committed when they are faced with challenges. When a leader takes the high ground with ease there is a sigh of relief because along that tough journey it is clear that studying military history, victorious leaders who are knowledgeable and skilled in their profession will continue to be worthy of promotions and advancements within the organization that they are assigned or attached too. Simple accomplishment of a warrior task under stress is demonstrated with a mastered flair and level of confidence that is a result of being motivated and trusting of their leaders. Leaders will also have increased motivation of their Soldiers often by just providing simple historic vignettes of proof that the mission to defend the constitution against all enemies both foreign and domestic is not new. It is with this in mind that there is a constant need to create future adaptive leaders to maintain this country’s ability to defend its national interest and borders.

This challenge in creating adaptive leaders across the Army, is difficult because of unrealistic expectations. These expectations are what determine what and how a leader trains the assigned Soldiers. A leader’s tactical and technical knowledge depends directly upon their experience and often length of service. These attributes can be further enhanced with a clear understanding of military history. Soldiers will always fully utilize the tutelage and experience if the veteran leader, even if it comes from the archives of military history. Combat arms leaders are constantly reminded of their warrior spirit as they are revered as the tip of the spear, while your combat service support leader is considered nonexistent in the more public display of historic events. “Since the beginning of strategic warfare...this profession over ten thousand years has influenced the rise and fall of many nations throughout history. It is the only recognized

profession that trains its members to protect lives by being able and willing to take someone else's life at the same time.”(Siddle, 11) This information or knowledge can only be achieved through advanced development of knowledge skills and attributes. “Without learning new ways, changing attitudes, values and behaviors, people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem, internalize the change itself.” (Linsky, 13)

Some people believe that the leadership skills of being, knowing, and doing, are somehow different in combat arms units from the combat support units. “A hundred thousand years ago when ‘war’ was first invented, Soldiering was pretty simple. ‘Armies’ were small...Ten thousand years later on the battlefield, things had changed” (Malone, 86). Through history we are able to see and determine just how these changes occur. The development of good leaders come from many lessons learned and is necessary for the continued development of our future leaders. Combat arms and combat support units have different missions but still have the same challenges. These challenges include being overwhelmed with tasks, shifting priorities and competing demands. It is through studying the historic results of military success and failures that one can see that the leadership development process and the roles and responsibilities of leaders in any organization, are exactly the same. Leaders will continue to develop and train soldiers at all levels. Studying military history will reflect how the sole intent is to eventually grow and develop Soldiers into future leaders. This is regardless of their career management field or military occupation, but it is to be successful on today's modern battlefield.

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