

Living and Learning- Is the Past a Map for Our Future

SGM Yerger, Todd R

United States Army Sergeant Major Academy

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SGM Taylor

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Abstract

Studying our military past is essential in benefiting our soldiers today. Though there are many battles of our past looking at the war in the Philippines, Vietnam and our current Global War on Terrorism provide some very important lessons. For example, in the Philippines we learned lessons from the use of Guerrilla type forces and the importance of providing basic needs such as teachers in winning the war. Moving from the Philippines to the Vietnam War, we were taught how detrimental the underestimation of enemy forces could be at Dien Bien Phu and we realized the effects of constant rotation on the war. Finally, our current Global War on Terrorism, though far from over has proven to be very useful for our soldiers. We are learning daily the importance of the local populace on our counterinsurgency techniques and with these lessons succeeding in our battles to win the war. The past is a very important tool and should never be disregarded for soldiers today and it continues to prove beneficial in our daily task.

Living and Learning- Is the Past a Map for Our Future

Many may question whether studying our past is of any great benefit to our future. For military professionals, studying and learning about our past, especially in the area of counter-insurgency, is essential in providing guidance and insight into our modern day warfare and therefore benefits our nation and its' servicemen for the future. By observing a few of our past battles in the Philippines, Vietnam and in our current Global War on Terrorism, one can see that learning from our past is a definite benefit and should never be underestimated.

One such lesson- learned in counter-insurgency was taken from The Philippine-American war from 1899 through 1902 and their use of Guerrilla type forces. The Philippine insurgency of 1899-1902 was significant in that it illustrated how a potentially disastrous situation was salvaged through intelligent leadership and flexibility. The greatest achievement was to use disciplined, creative soldiers to achieve a political victory. When US forces first occupied the Philippines there was no cohesive plan to occupy the former Spanish Colony. Instead of reaching out to Filipino insurgents who were fighting against the Spanish long before the Spanish occupation, President McKinley chose to annex the Philippines as a US Protectorate. This decision turned potential allies into foes; instead of the Spanish, they would now fight Yankee occupiers.

The insurgency in the Philippines faced several challenges that they were unable to resolve. The main issue was that the Philippines was not (and still is not) a homogenous population.

There were various ethnic, tribal and religious groups that did not get along together enough to conduct a coordinated strategy. The main area contested was the Island of Luzon where the rebel leader Aguinaldo fought the US occupation.

The US succeeded in the Philippines by using a carrot and stick strategy that separated the population from the Rebels resulting in victory. An important decision was to recruit rival ethnic groups to fight and destroy the Filipino rebel forces. These US sponsored militias and police forces effectively destroyed most of the isolated rebel groups. This policy was effective because it used Guerrilla type forces to destroy enemy Guerrilla forces. Additionally, the US Army resorted to civil war era style martial law where any rebels or their supporters would be executed on the spot. On several occasions, US forces interred entire areas into Concentration Camps to deny rebels of the support they needed from the local populace. This mirrored similar efforts by the British in South Africa to eliminate civilian support for Boer Commandos who plagued Britain's colonial aspirations. Although brutal, these efforts did separate the population from the rebels.

Despite their heavy handed tactics, the US occupation of the Philippines did offer much for ordinary Filipinos. Teachers were brought from the United States to provide educational services. The Spanish did little to help educate the average Filipino and this was very well received by the population. Instead of huge military installations that separated troops from the population, US forces were garrisoned in the communities that they were to protect. This allowed for greater interaction between the native populace and the US Army. The US Congress eventually voted to provide most of the protections of the US Constitution to all Filipinos. Civic

action on the part of the Americans assisted in the suppression of tropical diseases such as Malaria through field sanitation. The US Occupation constructed a vast road network which increased mobility. Instead of antagonizing the ruling class of Filipinos, the US administration placed many of the former elites into places of position and respect in the Government. This encouraged many potential rebel supporters to lean more towards the US side. Ultimately, the most powerful decision made by the US was to state that they were not going to permanently occupy the Philippines but instead were going to assist the Philippines to become a democracy. This eventually was derailed by the Japanese invasion of 1941; however by 1946 the Philippines was an independent.

Considering Vietnam and its many battles offers great opportunity to make today's soldiers stronger and better. Two such lessons can be taken from the underestimation of enemy forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1953 and the constant rotation of soldiers throughout the war. A poor strategy often means that soldiers on the ground pay the price needlessly.

The French command under General Henri Navarre made several critical strategic assumptions about their enemy that lead to the disastrous fall of Dien Bien Phu. Strategically, the French established their battle position in Dien Bien Phu to isolate the Kingdom of Laos, a member of the French Union from Viet-Minh influence. As described by the Chief of Staff of the French Army “[The] goal was to create military conditions that would allow the government to negotiate a satisfactory, honorable solution to the Indochinese affair. He had to show the Viet-Minh it had no chance of winning by force of arms.” (Deady, 2006, p 56). Both sides knew that they had to achieve something decisive on the ground prior to the May 8, 1954 Geneva Peace Conference. The Viet-minh lead by Ho-Chi Minh understood that they had to capture Dien Bien

Phu to have a strong position at the Geneva Peace Conference. On December 3, 1953, General Navarre ordered that the remote outpost be fortified and that the position “must be defended at all cost.” Both sides knew the implications and chose their courses of action. This set the stage for the confrontation.

Tactical assumptions by both sides led to the French failing and the Viet-Minh succeeding. The French assumed that they would be able to re-supply its isolated outpost from the Air. The People’s Republic of China assisted the Viet-Minh with captured enemy equipment from Korea. The Viet-Minh prior to the siege of Dien Bien Phu did not use Artillery; Chinese advisors soon remedied this by providing captured US artillery and training from experienced crews. This resulted in twenty-four well trained 105mm artillery crews that completely took the French by surprise. The Viet-Minh was able to establish heavy indirect fire support in the dense jungle. The Viet-Minh coordinated indirect fires to include Mortar, howitzer and long range heavy artillery. The enemy was also successful in deploying Anti-Aircraft Artillery to disrupt and to harass any potential Aerial re-supply. The Viet-Minh did commit one potentially fatal error at the beginning of the siege on March 13, 1954; they initially used Chinese style “Human Wave” attacks that were initially successful in Korea. In the first three days of the siege the Viet-Minh infantry suffered over 9,000 casualties including over 2,000 Killed. This was a rude lesson that the Viet-Minh learned and they soon adjusted their tactics by using tunnels and trenches to provide better cover for their soldiers. It worked primarily because the commanders on the ground were smart enough to adjust their plan.

The key element to the Viet-Mihn victory was their superior logistics. The garrison at Dien Bien Phu critically underestimated the enemy’s ability to establish logistics in difficult

terrain. The twenty-four 105mm artillery pieces and all the necessary supplies were essentially hauled by hand to hilltops surrounding the fort. The Viet-Mihn command was able to organize 33,500 workers to assist their forces providing over 20,000 tons of rice during the siege.

France assisted U.S. lead UN Forces in Korea and assumed that the U.S. would directly help them in Indochina. In April 1953, the French command presented a plan for US intervention, Operation Vulture. It was essentially a massive nighttime bombardment of the Viet-Mihn. Unfortunately for the French, this was asking too much, too late. President Eisenhower did not approve of intervention; he had been elected to “end the Korean conflict” and did not wish to get entangled in another war. US Secretary of State John F. Dulles did offer to provide two atomic bombs but the French government turned down the offer. Most of the US’s assistance to France was in the form of financial aid with Military equipment. The Eisenhower administration was able to provide for 80% of all financial costs of France’s war in Indo-China. Political assumptions ruined the French efforts because they waited too long for assistance.

The garrison at Dien Bien Phu was able to survive for 55 days under a pummeling of heavy artillery and constant attacks before being overrun by the Viet-Mihn on May 7, 1954. In that time the 16,000 man strong garrison had incurred 7,184 casualties to include 1,142 dead and 1,606 missing. Had these men been used in another manner perhaps the French would have had a stronger hand to play at the Geneva Peace table. Both the Viet-Mihn and French understood the strategic implications of the battle at Dien Bien Phu; the Viet-minh had displayed a stronger tactical vision that allowed them to win the strategic game at the bargaining table.

Despite the French Experience in Vietnam, the US Government decided to support the western-aligned South Vietnamese Government. The Geneva peace accords were supposed to

have provided a peaceful resolution to the political situation in Vietnam. The accords mandated that the northern and southern portions of the nation were to have elections in 1958 to elect a joint ruler. This never occurred because the United States feared that the communists were going to win the election. What resulted was that North Vietnam began a communist insurgency in South Vietnam in an attempt to overthrow the largely ineffectual US-aligned South Vietnamese government. This began the Viet-Cong insurgency that the US faced directly from 1965 through 1968 when the great majority of the Viet-Cong was destroyed in the battles of the Communist Tet-Offensive. Despite the destruction of the Viet-Cong in 1968, the Tet Offensive was a resounding success as the political victory for the communist forces.

US involvement initially consisted of Military and economic aid but evolved to active advisors and finally the deployment of ground forces. As an integral part of the active deployment of ground forces was the use of the draft and the Individual Rotation policy. The one year rotation system was a result of the draft system that was implemented during and after the Korean War where draftees were to serve for two years of active duty. In those two years a Soldier could expect at least a year of Basic Training, Advanced Individual Training and training at their unit prior to overseas service in West Germany, South Korea and eventually Vietnam.

The Selective Service System provided a workable framework until the Vietnam War was expanded in 1965 and the system was overloaded. At this crucial point, President Lyndon B. Johnson chose not to mobilize the National Guard and Reserves to fight in Vietnam. He felt that this would disturb the American public enough into debating about escalation of the war. Johnson wanted his social programs and not the War to be the focus of the American people. This essentially meant that there were not enough people to achieve the numbers needed by the

war effort. The solution that was agreed upon was that individuals, not units were rotated. What this essentially led to is a total lack of unit cohesion and this resulted in the loss of combat effectiveness. As a unit gained enough personnel that were acclimatized to the environment; they were often rotated home.

Another important consideration that was addressed during the Vietnam War was the rotation of combat leaders. Combat leaders at the company level were rotated every six in order to allow officers to gain combat experience. This had a negative effect on the experience of Platoon leaders and Company Commanders. Essentially, once a leader was trained they were rotated to a non-combat role. All their experience (or lack thereof) was wasted. This policy was seen as a double standard by Enlisted Soldiers; basically they had to serve twice the amount of time in the field as an officer. This divide developed into to a systematic breakdown in discipline which ultimately led to “Fragging” incidents which claimed several officers. Officers were also more concerned with “punching their ticket,” in other words having combat command time to gain promotion. This blatant careerism helped lay the foundation for the “Hollow Army” of the 1970s.

Though our current Global War on Terrorism is far from a past experience, we are already learning much from our counter-insurgency operations from the earlier years of this ongoing war. One such lesson that we are continually dealing with is the importance of the general population in our efforts to defeat the insurgents. This example, seen in many past battles is ever present with the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. “The objective of COIN is to win over the people who make up the outer layers of the insurgent support network. The government must establish both a consistently secure environment and realistic opportunities for its people to grow

and prosper politically and economically. It can eliminate the factors that drive people to fight in the first place by demonstrating that rational means of political change can work.” (Rowe, 2006, p5). Learning to do so through cultural awareness and developing social and economic programs in the local area can win over the people and ultimately undermine the insurgency that often has a stronghold throughout the communities. In order to do so leaders must understand the basic needs of the populace, their culture, and their fears if they are going to progress in winning the war and lay the ground work for a better future in these countries.

People may argue that the past has no relevance on our troops today, that the battles of our forefathers merely consisted of random acts that would have different outcomes with different people or technology and therefore, would have no effect on our soldiers today. However, as seen in The Philippines, Vietnam, and The Global War on Terrorism, to dismiss the past would set our current and future leaders on a path to fail that our fore fathers already traveled down. “No plan can be transposed unchanged from one context to another. The key for the military planner is to glean the proper lessons from principles and history, then apply them to the challenge at hand.” By studying these battles and their outcomes we are given insight and guidance for our future battles and enlightenment for those who will follow in our path for years to come.

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