

The Critical Role
Of Studying Military History
By Those in the
Profession of Military Arms

by

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Abstract

The study of military history is an important responsibility of those in the profession of arms. By learning from an organization's past mistakes and past successes it allows for future operations to have positive results and tighter unit cohesion. I will clarify this by the utilization of themes which will show both successes and failures from the study of, and failure to, study military history. These themes will encompass tactical mistakes made by failing to study military history, tactical advancements made by studying military history, and unit pride developed by studying the military history of the unit.

Introduction

The study of military history has been going on since man took up arms against his own kind. Ever since the first arrow was flung, historians have reviewed and questioned what was done and why was it done. How could the combatants have improved? Why did they fail? What was at fault? These are questions typically asked by a historian. Those in the profession of military arms need to study military history so that they can improve on their own applications of the profession and avoid the pitfalls of past mistakes. After action reviews are required and documented after every tactical operation be it in training or in war. Lessons learned from past conflicts can and will impact future military operations. Studying past military successes can be a gateway to future successes. Conversely, failure to study military history and past conflicts allows for the repeat of mistakes that can be costly in terms of lives and equipment. Certain military situations can and do repeat themselves. Tactics and techniques of combat continuously evolve only by the study of past mistakes. Failure to apply lessons learned does not allow for the improvement in tactics.

A unit's pride is based in no small part on the history of the unit. Whether the unit has been around for decades or whether it is a newly created unit, the unit's history long or short, becomes the basis for its pride. This is however, based on the fact that the unit did perform its mission in a distinguished manner. With units that have not done so, the unit's history is something to be forgotten or could be an embarrassment. Pride then comes from the individual and the comradeship between soldiers, not from the history. The study of a unit's history should strive to show the positive actions taken by a unit in difficult times if it is to be used as a tool to

increase the strength of the unit. Soldier's take great pride in telling the story of their unit; what it has done and where it has fought. Units with long histories have more ties to elements of the population. Units like the 82nd Airborne or the 101st Screaming Eagles are probably known to most segments of the general population all because of their history.

Failures

The Vietnam War was characterized by a highly irregular enemy that could blend in with the populace at will and one whose weapon of choice would be the booby trap, mine, or an improvised explosive device. The Viet Cong became adept at exploiting U.S. forces weakness for utilizing road born convoys to resupply forward operating bases, at the time known as fire bases. These local insurgents began the very effective use of mines and IED's in an effort to curtail re-supply and to demoralize American troops. "Thirty-three percent of U.S. casualties in Vietnam and twenty-eight percent of deaths were officially attributed to mines; these figures include losses caused by both IEDs and commercially manufactured mines." (Wikipedia Encyclopedia- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_truck ¶ 1) To counter these attacks, U.S. forces came to rely on gun trucks to protect convoys. Gun trucks were created by up armoring two and a half ton trucks and five ton trucks and arming them with various forms of automatic weapons ranging from 7.62mm to 40mm in caliber. Armor was first obtained from military scrap yards and by using sand bags. Later designs actually included loading armored personnel carriers on to flat bed trucks. The idea of gun trucks did serve the intended purpose and much success was made in protecting convoys.

Prior to the U.S. pullout, IEDS and mines were steadily being defeated by an increased use in mine sweepers, bomb sniffing dogs, and better armor on vehicles. The American forces realized that IED's and mines were a threat and countered successfully to minimize the impact from them.

Conversely, in Iraq, as Coalition Forces liberated the country in unarmored vehicles and had limited resources to counter mines and IEDS, the insurgent groups stepped up the emplacement of such devices. Munitions were available for the taking and emplacing an improvised explosive device was an easy, effective way at attacking coalition forces. Did the C.F. study history regarding weapons and tactics used in an insurgency? Were they ready for this kind of attack? In March 2003, most soft skin vehicles were unarmored with canvas sides and unarmored floor plates. As attacks of IED's increased, soldiers started utilizing extra armor salvaged from garbage pits and sand bagging floorboards of vehicles. The gun truck again was used to escort convoys and defeat IEDS and insurgent attacks. Locally created armored vehicles started to be replaced by properly designed and installed up armored kits for various families of vehicles. Vehicles could now withstand attacks from most IEDS and insurgent attacks. Additionally, with the development of new technology designed to defeat the IED itself, such as Counter Remote Electronic Warfare (CREW) devices, the attacks became less frequent. Training was improved for the individual soldier, with much emphasis on counter-IED.

Could the U.S. forces see this type of attack coming based off a study of history? Were lessons of the Vietnam War reviewed and implemented here? This paper cannot give a definitive answer to those questions as there are too many variables. Certainly the use of mines

and improvised explosive devices against soft targets such as convoys will be a constant threat in future wars. Lessons learned from past actions should be factored in when conducting these same types of operations. In this case, maybe history did repeat itself

Successes

Lessons learned from past military history can lead to the vast improvement on the way we conduct combat operations. Tactics and techniques evolve from a review of a unit's actions during combat. A typical term for this is an after action review which is a point in which a unit sits down and rehashes what happened during an operation. This after action review is documented and shared amongst the unit's soldiers as a learning tool.

A perfect example of taking lessons learned and developing them into a product which is used as a tool for other units is the U.S. Army's Center for Lessons Learned. CALL is a unique training organization that captures lessons learned from past conflict and puts it into a user friendly training tool, mostly found in booklet or pamphlet form. Right after" Operation Urgent Fury the Chief of Staff of the Army General John Wickham requested that the Army develop abilities to adapt forces to local conditions in combat." (Wikipedia encyclopedia en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Army_Center_for_Army_Lessons_Learned¶ 2) On August 1, 1985, CALL was officially created as a directorate of the Combined Arms Training Activity. CALL's mission "collects and analyzes data from a variety of current and historical sources" (United States Army Combined Arms Center Website¶ 3) shows that the study of historical documentation can be a very useful in developing tools for future operations. CALL uses a Research Division to collect and process information gleaned from historical sources,

operational records, and other data. The Integration Division and Publication Division takes this information and decides, in conjunction with the Army, what to focus its effort on. The final product from these two divisions is a user friendly ready reference used at all levels. CALL also has a Lessons Learned Division. This division's function is to deploy to theatre and directly observe, analyze, and gather information on current operations. This is studying history in a very direct form and allows current records to be captured and archived for later use.

The ability to quickly get information from CALL is a critical tool for leadership in a tactical environment. The strength of CALL is speed and accuracy. The lessons learned are quickly and easily disseminated to the user unit. This enhances training and the preparation for combat. Additionally, units in a combat zone can share information or be updated with the latest trends in a easily accessible format. CALL has placed most of its publications and products on a website and they are easily downloaded. Additionally, units can send in requests for information directly to CALL and they will gather information on the subject and get the information back out in a timely manner. This saves the unit a lot of time not having to do the research on the subject. The Center for Army Lessons Learned has been a great success in using the study of history and putting it into a user friendly product

Unit History

A soldier's sense of self worth and belonging has in a large part been associated to the soldier's unit. Whether or not the soldier belongs to the first platoon, or Charlie Company, it is that soldier's parent unit that provides him or her with a sense of belonging and pride. The history of

a unit directly affects the pride of the soldiers within that unit. If that unit has a long and distinguished history those soldier within in it will continue to strive for the same success as past members. Conversely, if a unit has a poor past history, those soldiers in it will do everything they can to correct or make up for it, in a sense creating positive history for the unit.

The Imperial German Army in World War 1 was a highly motivated, well disciplined force that although fighting against increasing odds, continued to battle on through years of grueling trench warfare. They believed in themselves and their army. In fact, when the final end came in 1918, some generals “refused to acknowledge that the Imperial Army had been defeated on the battlefield.” (Corum, 1992, Page 1) Twenty one years later a new German Army again took to the battlefield. A defeated army became a conquering army wiping away the past failures. This new German Army was set to avenge the Treaty of Versailles and write a new chapter history. What motivated these soldiers, did they want to undo past smears on the army’s record? The German Army’s early successes in World War 2 seem to justify that thought process. A unit’s history directly impacts the self worth and motivation of the soldier.

The United States Army has mandated that all units will complete the requirements of the Unit History Program. This program which focuses on company sized units and above, is the means which the unit documents the pertinent historical events that take place within the unit during peacetime and wartime. The program directly assigns an officer or NCO to manage the program and is an inspect-able item during organizational reviews. The Army requires that the unit maintain copies of all organizational operations orders, rosters, awards, photographs, and

anything that pertains to the actions of the unit. Additionally, specific events such as wartime deployment, will mandate even more specific requirements which would include personal interviews, story boards, and declassified information to name but a few.

The importance of this program cannot be stressed enough as many historical events, records, logs, photos, etc. are easily misplaced or lost out of context. This documentation must be cataloged properly, per regulation, in order to provide a reference for future generations. This historical documentation is processed and collected, then passed through successive chains of command. The program does not have a start or end point and there really never is a final product, just a continuation of documentation.

The unit's history is a specific area of study for soldier development. Most soldiers new to the unit are required to learn the past activities of the unit. They should be able to paraphrase the unit's history at will. Within the confines of the unit's physical location, memories and documentation of past events will proudly be displayed and reviewed. Traditions are established and passed on through generations of soldiers through the unit. The unit's identifying patch, colors, and unit crest are all visible clues on the unit's history and pride.

Summary

The profession of arms is a vast group of individuals, both military and civilian, with a simple desire to be the best. The study of military history is one means by which those in this profession can improve and be the best. The study allows for a review of past mistakes, provides a pathway forward for past successes, and gives pride to the unit as a whole. Tactics and techniques are improved upon by the study of military history and we continue to modify,

and adapt based off what we have learned. The failure to study military history is a vain attempt at ignoring past efforts, and the men and woman that did them. The benefits to studying history far outweigh the negatives, and most professional courses of study mandate a considerable portion of time to it. The study of military history directly contributes to future military history.

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