

Running Head: THE BENEFIT OF STUDYING MILITARY HISTORY

The Benefit of Studying Military History

SGM Sondra L. Helton

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class #58

SGM Rodney Nicholes

18 March 2008

## Abstract

It seems that most of today's Soldiers have a lack of interest in military history. Have we as leaders failed to impress upon them the importance of the past and the lessons learned? Has today's optempo in keeping up with current operations clouded our view for what has transpired in our history? I will prove throughout this paper with supporting evidence from the Battle of the Kasserine Pass, Task Force Smith, and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) of the Vietnam War that it is imperative that we, the leaders of today's Army implement military history into our busy schedules.

### The Benefit of Studying Military History

Throughout military history, successful armies looked at previous conflicts and used the lessons learned from those conflicts in the present and future conflicts. In contrast, those armies who failed to learn from past conflicts have met with disastrous results. The purpose of this argumentative essay is to bring attention to the importance of why military professionals should take time out of their busy schedules to study military history. If we do not have a clear understanding of the past, we will not appreciate where we have come from, how we have evolved, and what we have learned. Is it important for military professionals to take time out of their busy schedules to study military history? I believe that the answer is yes.

One of the most important things we can gain from studying military history would be the lessons learned from past conflicts'. In this paper, I will look at examples throughout American military history where previous lessons learned were not put into effect and catastrophic events ensued.

#### The Battle of Kasserine Pass

First, we will look at the Battle of Kasserine Pass, which was part of The Tunisia Campaign that took place in Kasserine Pass, Tunisia on February 19-25, 1943. This battle was significant for the fact of it being the first large-scale meeting of American and German forces in World War II. Unfortunately, inept and weak commanders led American Soldiers who fought in this battle. Additionally, American Soldiers were not prepared to fight against the formidable German tank warfare.

Four days of successive defeats cost II Corps dearly. The Americans lost 2,546 missing, 103 tanks, 280 vehicles, 18 field guns, 3 antitank guns, and 1 antiaircraft battery. Service and medical companies, miles behind the infantry and armor, had been reached by the onrushing panzers

(Anderson, 1993, p. 17). Not only did we lose Soldiers and equipment during this battle, we also lost a great deal of pride.

In 1939 (four years prior to the Battle of Kasserine Pass) Germany invaded Poland. The world watched as the Blitzkrieg or lightning war of the Germans rolled over Poland in a matter of days. German Tanks, supported by aircraft, rolled through the Polish defenses and the German Infantry mopped up the remaining Polish defenses. There was no doubt that the tactics and equipment that the German war machines used were far superior to those practiced by the United States or any of the Allied nations for that matter. It was four long years before America would commit land forces to fight against the Axis powers. Did our military and political leaders not have the intelligence of the German power? Did we not have time or the resources to train our Soldiers on the tactics used on the modern battlefield of the 1940s? Does this still happen today? Do we still have inept and weak commanders that lead us and have Soldiers not trained going into combat? Would studying military history aid in what is lacking in individuals?

During the initial move into Baghdad, the 507th Maintenance Company would appear to have had an inept commander, as he led them into one of the most remembered events of the beginning hours of Operation Iraqi Freedom; an ambush in An Nasiriyah, Iraq. If we implemented military history into our unit training, would we have carried this lesson forward onto today's battlefield? During the Battle of Kasserine Pass, they lost communications with each other, which resulted in great losses. On their convoy north, the 507th also lost communications. Communication is the most significant aspect of controlling the battlefield.

#### The Battle of Osan – Task Force Smith

Next, we will examine The Battle of Osan, well known as Task Force Smith. Task Force Smith is named for Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith, commanding officer, 1st Battalion,

21st Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. This was the first contact between the United States and North Korean forces during the Korean War. Task Force Smith turned out to be one of the most disastrous conflicts in American military history. The Soldiers of Task Force Smith were greatly outmanned, ill equipped, and not prepared; according to reports, the 540 Soldiers of this task force suffered a great deal. There were 180 casualties on the U.S. forces, and only about 120 casualties on the North Korean force.

According to *The Lessons Learned from Task Force Smith (2005)*, The Army commanders in Tokyo primarily focused on occupation duty in Japan. Therefore, the Soldiers of 1-21 Infantry and the rest of the occupation forces in Japan became complacent, poorly trained and were ill equipped. As is so often the case, the blame really lies with the politicians.

In comparing today's conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the deployments reflected on the poor training plans of the current force. The mind set of the Army force was still set in the Cold War era. Many training centers still fought force on force rather than asymmetric, low intensity conflict of today. This was in spite of the years of low intensity conflicts that occurred around the world, even those that the United States took part.

### Vietnam

Last, we will examine the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) of the Vietnam War. In 1967 the establishment of the CORDS formed. The purpose was to place the disorderly and unproductive civilian pacification programs under the military. President Lyndon B. Johnson was instrumental in the implementation of this program. President Johnson also took an active interest in seeing the pacification process function smoothly under a single manager: Gen. William Westmoreland (Andrade, 2005).

The CORDS were set up to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. We felt

this was a way to win and support the war effort. The problem with this program was, there was no consensus with the Vietnamese people on how to accomplish this type of mission.

Regrettably, in the end, America failed in Vietnam, and it is difficult to convince the public or policymakers that there is anything to learn from a losing effort. However, the U.S. military did make important headway in pacification, and it would be foolish to let that experience slip away (Andrade, 2005).

In contrast to Task Force Smith and the Battle for Kasserine Pass, the United States military did in fact understand the importance of winning the local peoples trust to winning the battle. Thus, today we have Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). According to Fact Sheet - Office of the Spokesman:

“The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were established in Afghanistan for the international community to provide both improved security and to facilitate reconstruction and economic development throughout the country. The United States and the international community envision the PRTs as transitional structures – they are established to support the elected Afghan government” (Provincial Reconstruction Teams, 2006).

### Conclusion

In closing, this research paper has addressed the significance of why military professionals should take time out of their busy schedules to study military history. The evidence clearly supports my argument, and shows it is imperative that we implement military history into our busy schedules in order to learn from past successes or mistakes. The Battle of Kasserine Pass, the Battle of Osan – Task Force Smith and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) of the Vietnam War are only three of the many conflicts our

military has participated in and all have several lessons we can learn.

## References

- Andrade, D. (2005, December 29). Three Lessons From Vietnam. Retrieved March 12, 2008, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/28/AR2005122801144.html>.
- Anderson, C.R.. (1993). Tunisia: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II (Pamphlet). CMH Pub 72-12. Retrieved March 9, 2008, from <http://ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-C-Tunisia/index.html>.
- Blumenson, M. (1986) "Kasserine Pass, 20 January – 22 February 1943," in *America's First Battles, 1776 -1965* (pp. 226-265). Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- The Lessons Learned from Task Force Smith. (2005, July 8). Remembering Task Force Smith - Part 5. Retrieved March 12, 2008, from [http://jetiranger.tripod.com/BLOG/index.blog?entry\\_id=1150564](http://jetiranger.tripod.com/BLOG/index.blog?entry_id=1150564).
- Provincial Reconstruction Teams. (2006, January 31). Fact Sheet - Office of the Spokesman. Retrieved March 12, 2008, from <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/60085.htm>