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Army's Unpreparedness before World War II and the Korean Conflict

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## Introduction

The Army is charge to fight the nation's war and protect the nation from all enemies both foreign and domestic. However, the Army has not always been ready for this mission at times. The Army has been unprepared for its main mission of fighting the nation's wars because of the North African Campaign during World War II the Army had to learn to fight as a large trained force. In the Korean War Conflict, the Army was unprepared due to the downsizing after World War II. Numerous reasons are the causes of this unpreparedness in our Army. With the upcoming presidential elections, the nation will need to ensure that the same mistakes it has made previously are not made again. The North African Campaign at the onset of World War II and the Korean Conflict are similar in the Army's unpreparedness, but are different in time and resources in the peacetime environment.

## North African Campaign

The North African Campaign in 1942 was the first serious test for the Army in the opening of World War II. It was not a success at the beginning of the operation. Numerous factors led to the state of the military preparedness. From the end of World War I in November 1918, the Army was manned at 850,000 soldiers and the War Department had a budget of \$6,364 million, adjusted to fiscal year 2009 budget values. In the ensuing 23 years, the Army went down to 140,000 Soldiers, and the nation went through a Depression. The total budget from 1918 to 1941 was \$70,169 million adjusted for fiscal year 2009 budget values. Lack of manning and money to buy needed resources did not allow for the Army to be ready for its mission of fighting and winning the nations wars (Chantrill, 2007).

### *Pre WWII Army*

The United States Army doctrine prior to World War II “held that tanks ought not fight other tanks, but should leave that job to specialized tank destroyers while armor formations tore through defenses and ripped up the enemy rear.” (Atkinson, 2002). Additionally crippling the ability of the armor forces in North Africa campaign was a post World War I regulation that “prohibited the development of tanks heavier than thirty tons, and until 1941 tank armor was constructed only to stop small arms fire.” (Atkinson, 2002). All this led to disaster in the early campaigns of the North African theater of operations in 1942 when American Armor units went head to head with German Armor units.

### *WWII Buildup of the Army*

In the year 1939, the Army was given the ability to federalize the National Guards and initiated a draft to raise the Army strength above the 1939 five divisions level. The National Guard units and draftees were limited in their time of service and duty locations. The law allowed for only 12 months of federalized service and duty only in the Western Hemisphere. Another fact leading to the poor showing was in 1939 the Army made only six tanks. The average age of a Major was forty-eight years old and not one officer on active duty in 1941 had commanded a division or higher unit previously in World War I (Atkinson, 2002).

### *Consequences of Untrained Units in North Africa*

In the early North African campaigns of World War II, A.D. Divine assessed the United States Army shortcomings as “The faults were clear enough: the greatest of them was an initial lack of appreciation of the possibilities of the enemy; a certain indiscipline of mind; a tendency towards exaggeration...Men used the skyline because the view was better from there. Men

neglected camouflage because it might smack of overanxiety. Men failed to dig slit trenches because the work was hard.” (Atkinson, 2002). The lack of funds to buy equipment, low manning levels, poor training at all levels and poor leadership lead to a disaster in the North African Campaign. This campaign did allow time for the Army to learn from its mistakes and grow.

#### *Examples of NCOs overcoming the unpreparedness*

The Non-Commission Officer (NCO) has always been a leader, stepping up to the leadership mantle, and taking charge to accomplish the mission and care for his Soldiers. One such example of an NCO during the early stages of World War II was SGT William L. Nelson, who won the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously at Djebel Dardys, Northwest of Sedjenane, Tunisia, on April 24, 1943. SGT Nelson led his mortar section to a forward position and established a mortar firing position. After their emplacement, he went to a forward position to call for fire. Taking a heavy toll on the enemy, he continued to call for fire throughout the day even when mortally wounded. SGT Nelson’s leading by example and accomplishing the mission reflect well upon the NCO Corp and their two charges in the NCO creed, the accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of the his men (Medal of Honor Recipients: Congressional Medal of Honor Society, 2008).

#### Korean Conflict

Compared to World War II, the Korean Conflict had a short time period for the Army to lose the lessons learned in fighting from the World War II. From September 2, 1945 until June 24, 1950, downsizing the nation’s military and turning the attention of the economy to spurring new growth after World War II caused problems in the early stages of the Korean Conflict. The

budget in 1945 was \$93,743 million reflected in 2009 values. During the short six years, the defense budget was only \$235,868 million with a low of \$19,745 million in 1948 (Chantrill, 2007). In contrast the budget before World War II was \$165,699 million smaller than the budget before the Korean Conflict. The downsizing Army from 8 million Soldiers and 89 divisions in 1945 to 591,000 Soldiers and 10 divisions in 1950 did not help in keeping the Army prepared for its mission. With this downsized force, new missions of constabulary and nation building helped in reducing training and readiness levels of the Army for its mission of fighting the nation's wars (Stewart, 2005).

#### *Pre Korean Conflict Army*

In contrast to the pre World War II, the pre Korean Conflict Army and military was involved in two major missions. Downsizing the force to the levels to help in reducing the military budget to assist in paying for the cost associated with World War II. The downsizing and reduced spending slowed down the amount of new equipment and training that was done. Another factor influencing the budget of the Army was the establishment of the Air Force in 1947 as a separate branch of the Department of Defense. Another mission was the nation building through the constabulary forces in Europe and Asia by the Army. This distracted from the core mission of training to fight the nation's wars. Finally, the reason a lot of reduction in overall manpower and spending was the weapon of mass destruction that ended the World War II. The atomic bomb provided to the United States a weapon no other nation had until 1949 when the Soviet Union developed their atomic bomb.

#### *Examples of NCOs overcoming the unpreparedness*

In contrast to World War II, the Korean Conflict was special in that the Soldiers had two things helping them in the fighting. Experienced leaders who had lead units in World War II at

the same or higher level they were leading them now. Additionally, they had NCOs who were experienced in the leading and taking care of Soldiers in combat. One such example of an NCO taking care of his Soldiers and showing leadership under fire was SGT George D. Libby, who won the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously on July 20, 1950 near Taejon, Korea. SGT Libby, a veteran of World War II fighting in Europe, during the retreat into the Pusan Perimeter led a vehicle through enemy roadblocks. The vehicle was loaded with American wounded, SGT Libby rode shotgun and continue to fight through the roadblock and pick up more wounded Soldiers as they made their way south. This shows the leadership and personal courage under fire that had been a part of our NCO Corp and Army values that continues to this day (Medal of Honor Recipients: Congressional Medal of Honor Society, 2008).

#### Conclusion

The famous War World II news correspondent Ernie Pyle said it best “You need feel no shame or concern about their ability...There is nothing wrong with the common American Soldier. His fighting spirit is good. His morale is okay. The deeper he gets into a fight, the more of a fighting man he becomes.” (Atkinson, 2002). The Army has always been in various states of readiness during peacetime. Nevertheless, the Army has always prevailed in combat when called upon by the nation. We can learn from our mistakes after World War I and World War II in being prepared for future conflicts. We will need to ensure our military budget is the properly resourced, units manned to the appropriate level, and unit and Soldier training resourced and executed properly. We need to remember the North African Campaign and the Korean Conflict were similar in unpreparedness but were different in leadership, training, resourcing and manning levels.

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