

Running head: THE STUDY OF MILITARY HISTORY

The Study of Military History: Justification and Importance

Steven A. Bunting

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class 58

SGM (R) Osvarado Vazquez

March 15, 2008

## Abstract

Over the years many American scholars and military professionals have argued that the study of military history is vital to an understanding of why we are the way we are and how we can better prepare ourselves for the challenges of the future. Military professionals, in particular, have been known for stating that if we do not learn the lessons of the past we are destined to repeat our failures and shortcomings. The fact is that military officers and NCOs have the ability to control their destinies only to the extent that they can control the battlefield around them at any given time. A thorough understanding of past battlefield experiences can go a long way toward success in the future.

## The Study of Military History: Justification and Importance

Studying military history is more than simply knowing who won what battles and how many casualties one side suffered as opposed to the other. This discipline is about understanding why battles and wars were fought in the first place, how one side was able to defeat the other, and, most importantly for Soldiers, how they can learn from the actions and circumstances of others in order not to repeat mistakes in the future. In many cases, however, the understanding that is gained by a small number of Soldiers in a given battle or engagement is lost once those Soldiers leave the service or move on to other battlefields. Even in cases where they write journals or diaries that describe the events they witnessed and took part in, other Soldiers who read such accounts are generally unable to fully understand the circumstances of those events in order to gain a thorough understanding of what happened. For example, a Soldier today who reads an account of a firefight in the jungle of Vietnam cannot fully grasp the numerous factors that caused a unit to do what it did and why. On a basic level, however, the Soldier reading about such a battle can gain an appreciation for the discipline and teamwork employed by the Soldiers of that unit, and he can probably then apply that understanding to his own modern day situation. On a higher level, military professionals want to know about the overall factors that lead to the success or failure of that unit: Were the Soldiers of that unit prepared for what happened? Did the unit's leaders act effectively and appropriately given the circumstances? Was the unit placed in a situation for which it was simply unprepared or unqualified? And how did the performance of that unit affect the overall outcome of the battle or conflict at hand? Finally, an effective and thorough study of military battles and campaigns may not assist the modern day Soldier at all. Soldiers rely on much more than just highly motivated comrades and well-trained leaders to be effective on the battlefield. American Soldiers today require a high degree of material and

political support from home to carry out their missions on the battlefield. When such support is missing from the equation, even the most effective units can falter. In such a case, even the most historically well-versed military professional may only be able to ponder what could have been.

#### The Civil War: Major General Emory Upton at “The Bloody Angle”

On May 10, 1864, Major General Emory Upton found himself in command of a division of Union troops during the Battle of Spotsylvania. General Grant had given him the task of breaking through the Confederate lines in order to collapse their main defensive perimeter and cause a general retreat toward Richmond (Ambrose, 1964). For months the Army of Northern Virginia, under the command of General Robert E. Lee, was able to effectively outmaneuver the Union’s Army of the Potomac under Grant and prevent any breakthrough. At this point in the Civil War, both sides understood quite well how costly frontal assaults could be and that they should be avoided if at all possible. A well-supported unit in a defensive posture was able to sweep the battlefield with devastating artillery and rifle fire and cause tremendous losses to an advancing force. General Grant found himself burdened with the task of trying to outmaneuver a smaller and more agile enemy force that only needed to survive in order to win the war.

Major General Upton proposed months earlier to Grant a new technique for attacking well-defended enemy positions, while avoiding the costly loss of life that generally resulted. During the Battle of Spotsylvania, this new technique was put to the test. Most assaults during the Civil War took place by putting units on line and advancing across a wide front directly into the most devastating fire the enemy could produce. Upton’s proposal called for an attack by large columns that minimized the number of attacking Soldiers who were exposed to enemy fire (Ambrose, 1964). The objective of these columns was to advance across the open space that separated them from the enemy as quickly as possible. Once the columns reached the enemy

trenches they immediately attacked the enemy Soldiers from the sides. In this way, fewer enemy Soldiers were able to bring their rifles to bear and engage the attackers. Once the attacking Soldiers entered the enemy trenches the defenders were usually forced to retreat and attempt to defend from another position. If an attacking force was well-disciplined and supported appropriately, it could continue to advance in such a manner until the enemy line simply collapsed and failed to re-form. At Spotsylvania, this new tactic worked very well and took the Confederates by surprise (Ambrose, 1964).

It is worth noting that this tactic was the result of serious study by several Union officers who had been assigned the task of developing new techniques that would save lives and end the war sooner. This study began after the Battle of Gettysburg in July of the previous year. The Union commander on the field, General Meade, observed the devastating loss of life that was inflicted upon the division of General Pickett during the infamous Pickett's Charge (nearly 80% of the members of the unit were either killed or wounded and it ceased to exist as a fighting force). Amazingly, this same tactic was employed during World War I during some of the trench fighting on the Western Front. American Soldiers came to understand that they could more effectively exploit the enemy positions by attacking them in a loose column that minimized their exposure during the movement across the no-man's-land. This vignette provides a superb example of how the study of military tactics from past battles aided American Soldiers more than fifty years later!

#### The Korean War: Task Force Smith

During the post-World War II years, many U.S. Army units found themselves on occupation duty in many parts of the world. Although there was a general tendency in the months that immediately followed the end of the war to bring most American Soldiers home,

thousands were kept overseas in places like Germany, Italy, and Japan. Suddenly, many thousands of Soldiers found themselves transformed from combat troops to inhabitants of a garrison environment with an easygoing lifestyle. When the majority of the Soldiers went home, the equipment and other supplies that were required during combat operations were reduced tremendously. In most cases, this situation left many Army units with a very limited capability to train and maintain readiness. In the case of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division on occupation duty in Japan in 1948 and 1949, combat training and readiness took a backseat to the more mundane duties of occupation. Despite several warnings, the United States government found itself taken completely by surprise when North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950 (American Military History, Volume II, 2005).

Although elements of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (namely the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment and the 52<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion) did their best to train and maintain a combat edge, they were woefully under-manned and under-equipped (Flint, 1986). For example, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry did not have a battalion staff, and the companies were manned by skeleton crews of NCOs. They simply did not have enough troops to conduct meaningful training of any kind. Furthermore, due to a lack of adequate training areas for maneuver, the tanks that should have been a vital part of the combined-arms team at the heart of the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry were eliminated from the tables of organization (Flint, 1986). The result of this lack of emphasis on training for war had tragic consequences for the Soldiers of Task Force Smith during June and July of 1950. During those first few fateful weeks of combat, the elements of Task Force Smith retreated after every encounter with the enemy. Under the command of LTC Charles B. Smith, the unit suffered heavy casualties and was finally relieved by the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division after several punishing defeats at the hands of the North Koreans. According to Flint (1986), “Veterans of the division

are quick to admit failure, but in truth, the poor performance of the 24<sup>th</sup> was more the result of inadequate preparation during the prewar years in Japan than of any specific lapse on the battlefield” (p. 266).

Although the losses sustained by Task Force Smith were tragic and could have been minimized by a more thorough preparation for combat, the real tragedy lies elsewhere. It seems inconceivable that a major combat division of the U.S. Army that had been so powerful just a few years earlier could have become so ineffective in such a short period of time. The numerous lessons learned during so many hard-fought battles and the experiences gained as a result during World War II seemed to vanish all too quickly. The lesson to be learned from the experience of Task Force Smith in 1950 is that effective combat power should be treated as a precious commodity that must be preserved for use at a later date. The training and experiences of combat veterans should never be squandered in a rush to disarm and get the troops home. When such actions take place in the face of a looming threat that is both credible and apparent, the resulting tragedy rises to the level of criminal neglect that harms all Soldiers and the nation they serve.

### Conclusion

In studying military history, scholars and professionals should take care to distinguish between those failures that were avoidable and those that were not. In both cases, however, the student of military history can learn a great deal. In studying the actions of Emory Upton during the Civil War, the student should learn that an innovative and thoughtful evaluation of tactics on the battlefield can save lives and shorten a war. This is a good example of a case where Soldiers can influence their own destinies and have a positive impact on the outcome of a battle. Furthermore, the student should recognize how Soldiers fifty years later during World War I were able to take Upton’s tactical lesson and apply it for their own benefit. Again, the tactical

application of this lesson was able to save lives and positively impact the battlefield. The fact that such a tactic was used on two different battlefields more than fifty years apart should make the student of military history understand that separate events do not take place in a vacuum. A careful study of military history can always reveal some tactical or strategic connection that helps us to understand the bigger picture of how we reached our current state of affairs.

Conversely, the example of Task Force Smith should cause the student of military history to understand that there are factors beyond the control of the Soldiers on the ground that can have a staggering and tragic impact on a battle or a war. The Soldiers of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were put in a situation where they had minimal equipment and training resources. They were then tasked with engaging an enemy that was superior to them in the number of personnel, equipment, and training with minimal time to prepare for the battle. In this case, understanding one's limitations on the battlefield and how to minimize losses by trading terrain for time can go a long way toward keeping oneself alive while inflicting maximum casualties on the enemy. Finally, the student of military history (whether a scholar or a Soldier himself) should recognize that none of the lessons discussed above are ever easily achieved and understood. Understanding military history requires a patient and careful approach to learning that starts with a determined and focused education. According to Emory Upton (Ambrose, 1964), "It should impress us with the conviction that, if in future wars we would increase the chances of victory, and diminish the waste of human life, we should devote our attention to the education of our NCOs. . . ." (p. 59).

References

- Ambrose, S. (1964). "An Attempt to Transform in the Midst of War—and After: Emory Upton's Proposal." *Upton and the Army*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- American Military History, Volume II. (2005). *The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2003*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History.
- Flint, R. (1986). "Task Force Smith and the 24<sup>th</sup> Division: Delay and Withdrawal, 5-19 July 1950." *America's First Battles, 1776-1965*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

If you need to type anything after the reference list then  
start it on this page