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ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

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Abstract

The United States military has a history of being unprepared for the opening shots of a conflict. The past has shown that between conflicts the training and preparedness of personnel and units degrades as the time from the last conflict grows. This lack of readiness has many causes, to include the loss of the knowledge at the junior and middle leadership ranks. While this alone is not the only cause, as time and distance from the last battlefield grows, so too does the loss of knowledge and experience at the direct leadership levels. The opening ground battles of World War Two and Operation Just Cause, while nearly 50 years apart, show that the U.S. Army was spending more time updating doctrine to fight the last battle rather than using the past to look to the future opening engagements.

The history of the United States Army is replete with the same problems being repeated. In between the conflicts, where there is no direct combat, no stimulus to adapt, no clear vision of when or how the next enemy will fight that the U.S. Army falls into the same cycle of basing its training and doctrine off of the last successful battles.

During both the opening stages of the ground battles in World War Two at Kasserine Pass in north Africa and again forty-six years later during Operation Just Cause in Panama the doctrine and training that brought the Soldiers to the battlefield was better suited at fighting and winning the last battles of the war than of preparing the Soldiers to fight the opening battles of the next war. In both cases, it was the leaders at the small unit level that took the training they had been given and shaped it to fit the battle they were fighting.

During the initial stages of any conflict the commander's at high levels maintain the decision making authority for fighting the initial battles. The reasons for this are numerous and demonstrate both the best and the worst of both civilian and military decision making.

Time is one of the largest factors for readiness. As the memory fades, so too does the knowledge and experience that goes along with it. Considering most conflicts the United States fights end in success for the U.S. it is even more likely that focus of training and preparedness will be on the last battles that won the war, not the initial battles that the U.S. was unprepared to fight.

While the United States had been at war for a year prior to the battle at Kasserine Pass, U.S. ground forces had yet to fight the enemy in World War Two. The last ground battles that the U.S. Army had fought against an organized and trained military were distant memories from World War I. In the intervening years the force was drawn down, equipment improvements

became a low priority, continued development of doctrine came to a standstill, and those that had fought in the trenches as junior leaders were now the senior leaders of the military – and the remaining Soldiers with experience in the chaos of war. The experience of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France in 1918, particularly the final phase, largely determined Army doctrine during the interwar years (Blumenson, 227).

The intervening years between the Vietnam War and before Operation Just Cause were different in a couple of cases. The time factor was down to fourteen years and the cold war had driven equipment improvements and fielding, though mainly big ticket items. Improvements in doctrine interoperability had been made, especially in the five years preceding Operation Just Cause, due in part to the communications issues encountered during Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983. The training model had seen a significant change, due to the move to an all volunteer army and from lessons learned in Vietnam that small units were fighting the battles. One thing did remain the same; those who were junior leaders during the Vietnam War were now the senior leaders in 1989. The gap was not as significant, with several leaders at the battalion and brigade level being veterans of Vietnam, but the distance was still there.

It comes as no surprise that decision making authority remained at the higher levels of command. Those that have been in combat are leery of those that have not. How will they react when faced with enemy fire, will they anticipate the unexpected, can they be trusted to accomplish the mission, do they understand the whole mission. Trust is especially difficult to achieve when the human endeavor is war and the activity includes shooting, fighting, and possibly dying (Briggs, 9). While the subordinates may have the trust of the war proven superiors in training, it is a different type of trust that must be proven under fire before the confidence in the junior leader's ability is gained. Prior to the Vietnam War very little training

was dedicated to the NCO corps resulting in NCO's that were technically capable of performing their mission, but had not been trained on leadership and higher level military functions.

Leading into World War II the U. S. Army was quickly enlarged. As such, experience was limited in the both the NCO corps and the junior officer levels. For the most part the opposite was true in the 1980's – the NCO corps was better trained and schooled, particularly on the administrative and logistical tasks of their positions, but the schooling was long and did not integrate the various branches. NCO's of both time frames could train their Soldiers to be technically proficient in their tasks, but were lacking on the tactical knowledge to work independently at the small unit level.

Communications is always difficult, particularly when multiple branches, service components, and nations come together at the initial stages of a conflict. At Kasserine pass, three nations, the U.S., Britain, and France, fought the Axis powers. To coordinate the units control was maintained at the higher levels, where it was much easier to communicate between the various nations forces. Leading up to and during the initial stages of Operation Just Cause operational security dictated keeping the communications closed at the lower levels. Add in the amount of forces flowing into the area of operations during the initial stages of the operations, communications between units was virtually impossible until the initial battles were over. Maintaining communications at this level does not allow the NCO's the opportunity to accurately prepare their Soldiers for upcoming initial stages of a conflict.

Without the information, the junior leaders must prepare their units using basic doctrine and then learn on the fly what needs to be adjusted to win on the battlefield, but unfortunately as shown at Kasserine Pass this comes with a very steep price in terms of men and equipment. The

price was not nearly as high in Panama, but the rapid change rules of engagement forced NCO's to quickly redirect their Soldiers from the direct action roles they had started the mission in to roles that they had not been prepared to perform in operations other than war. Had the communications process been opened up NCO's would have been able to see ahead to the transition from combat to peacekeeping operations and trained their Soldiers accordingly.

There are advantages to maintaining the decision authority at high levels. It does ensure that information is vetted before acted upon. This keeps the junior leaders and NCO's from continually trying to adjust the training plan to meet every new piece of intelligence that comes down the chain of command. Focusing on the basic doctrine and being prepared to adjust as soon as the enemy is met may not be pretty in the short term, but can yield longer term positives as the units have not invested time in becoming so specific in their training that they resist major changes in the way they do business.

Like the senior leaders above them junior leaders need to gain self-confidence in their ability to make correct decisions and be prepared to accept the losses that will ultimately be made by the Soldiers under their charge. NCO's, particularly junior NCO's are an integral part of their organization. Losses hit them hard and until battle hardened they may be very hesitant at sending their Soldiers back into harm's way. Concerns such as national interest, the American public, Congress, military strategy, and domestic and foreign opposition are far above the common Soldier's sphere of awareness (Briggs, 143). However, during the initial military stages of a conflict these items can be every bit as important to the overall success or failure of the operation. NCO's need to prepare their Soldier's to execute the mission and follow the commander's intent instead of getting bogged down with concerns that are far above the hilltop or city block they are located.

Very seldom will we know when or where the next outbreak of hostilities will take place or who or how that enemy will fight. Maintaining the decision making authority at higher levels allows the junior officers and NCO's to prepare for the initial operations against the enemy. The readiness of the units to perform in combat is one of the primary tasks of NCO's. Obstacles, such as doctrine that wins the last war, senior leaders that have the only combat experience, and equipment that has not been battle tested are not currently present in the U.S. Army today. In today's networked world knowledge is being captured in every conceivable way, but fundamentally, if the U.S. Army, and the NCO corps in particular, forget what level of preparedness and readiness we had at the start of a conflict we can quickly lapse and train on how to win the last war better instead of preparing for the unknowns of the initial stages of the next conflict.

References

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