

Running Heading: Lest We Forget

Lest We Forget

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Abstract

Today, thanks to resources like the internet, it has never been easier for the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) to study history. This is a good thing, because there has never been a greater need for the NCO to study history. The Army too has recognized this need, and established the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center to help all leaders in this endeavor. The rapidly changing world and the War on Terror mandate that NCOs look back on the lessons of history to glean knowledge, not only of how to fight, but why to fight as well. Thankfully, the Army has learned important lessons from examples such as Task Force Smith. On the other hand, it has failed to learn lessons from the La Drang Valley in Vietnam, and ignored critical documents such as the Small Wars Manual. NCOs must not only study military history, but the histories of important topics such as religions as well. Understanding religious issues will help NCOs understand the mind of the Islamic extremist, and remembering the faith of our heritage will help us to understand the principles for which we fight.

In this rapidly moving generation, the need for military professionals to study history is obvious. While the Army is giving attention to this fact through the creation of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, and has learned lessons from such disasters as Task Force Smith, the Army has still failed to learn critical lessons from the La Drang Valley during the Vietnam War, as well as overlooked critical doctrine from the Small Wars Manual. In this volatile age, leaders should learn not only military history, but world and religious history as well, in order to understand our enemies, and most importantly, remember the values, which are the foundation for this nation.

In this digital age of instant information, it has never been easier for the NCO to study history. Using the internet, lessons learned on the battlefield are immediately available to the entire Army. At times, however, this inundation of information can seem overwhelming. Today, information about everything and anything can fill up an inbox very quickly, and one can easily be tempted to start hitting the delete button. This creates a problem. When we respond in this manner, we may miss valuable information that may benefit our units; both in our combat engagements and leadership issues. Therefore, NCOs must make a conscious effort to dedicate time to reviewing the lessons of history. We must not just ask who, what, when, where, and how, but also, the all-important question of why?

Fortunately, for today's NCO, the Army has realized the need for leaders to learn the lessons of history. As a result, the Army developed the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center in 1999, and has plans to improve the facility through the year 2011 (USAHEC). Additionally, the Army published AR 870-5 in 1999. This regulation discusses the Army Historical Program, and its various facets. Clearly, the Army recognizes the importance of

military history, and as leaders, we should also. Let us begin by looking at Task Force Smith, a positive example of how the Army has actually learned a lesson from history and capitalized on it.

Task Force Smith was the under-strength, ill-equipped, and ill-fated battalion from the 24th Infantry Division that fought the first battle of the Korean War. Despite the lack of training and unit cohesion, the biggest issue (arguably) was their lack of proper equipment for the fight. During General (Retired) Gordon Sullivan's tour as Army Chief of Staff, he adopted the motto "no more Task Force Smiths" (Fukumitsu, 1996), meaning the U.S. would never again have a hollow, untrained, and unequipped Army. After the September 11 attacks, the Army began a crusade to ensure its Soldiers had the best equipment in the world with which to fight.

Unfortunately, for us, the Army has not learned all its lessons quite so well. Let us now turn our attention towards some examples of how failure to learn from our recent military history has cost us time and effort, if not lives, in the current War on Terror.

Approximately 40 years ago, the United States Army got involved in a lovely little country in Southeast Asia known as Vietnam. Through the years of our involvement there, there are undoubtedly hundreds, if not thousands, of tips and tricks gleaned from all that transpired during the conflict. While the fundamental reason for our involvement in each country was different, today's War on Terror is similar to the Vietnam War in many respects. The most obvious likeness between the War on Terror and Vietnam is the fight against an insurgent group that easily blends in with the local populace.

One can see another similarity between the War on Terror and Vietnam in the situation at the La Drang Valley. Some have seen the battle at La Drang as an example of the entire Vietnam War. Though the U.S. had superiority through the use of indirect and air firepower, the enemy

held his own by bringing the fight in close, thus mitigating the use of our assets (Wikipedia). The comparable lesson at La Drang was that while we are a technologically superior force, the relatively ill-equipped anti-Iraqi forces seem to be holding their own quite well.

There are undoubtedly many similarities between Vietnam and the War on Terror in tactics and employment of assets, as well as leadership issues. NCOs should study these areas, not to become political analysts, but to save the lives of Soldiers. How many mistakes in Iraq would have been victories if the NCO corps had devoted some time to learning the lessons of Vietnam prior to going to Iraq? Many lessons learned in Vietnam came the hard way, because the Army of that time failed to study history. If the U.S. Army of the Vietnam era had reached back several decades, it would have found a valuable resource on which to draw – the USMC Small Wars Manual.

The Small Wars Manual was a product of the U.S. involvement in the Banana Wars in Central and South America in the early 1900's. The Marine Corps penned the manual as a guide to dealing with smaller conflicts and operations other than war. By the time the Vietnam War came about, the Small Wars Manual seemed forgotten. How could this have happened? The primary reasons are: 1) the fact that the U.S. had been fighting primarily large conflicts (WW I, WW II and the Korean War), and 2) the Cold War (Sullivan, AY 05-06). As the U.S. focused on the atomic threat, it lost focus on what it would take to win on the ground. Nevertheless, a solid doctrinal manual existed that would have brought critical tactical knowledge to the Vietnam War.

Unfortunately, for the Army, the Small Wars Manual was still relatively unknown until we were neck deep in Iraq. The lesson learned in the early 1900's sat dusty on a bookshelf for almost 60 years. Many of the subjects areas contained in the Small Wars Manual are the same

issues that U.S. forces dealt with in Vietnam, and are dealing with today in Iraq. Issues such as logistics, civil military operations, contracts with local nationals, and counterinsurgent techniques are all addressed in the timeless Small Wars Manual. The Army finally got on the ball and released a new counterinsurgency manual in 2006. The goal of studying these past events is to be prepared *before* the next conflict starts, as opposed to five years after the war starts.

Several of the Army's Senior Leaders felt that the U.S. was ill prepared for the War in Iraq. A statement by former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Jack Keane clearly illustrates the importance of retaining the lessons from previous conflicts. He said, "We put an Army on the battlefield that I had been a part of for 37 years. It does not have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency . . . After the Vietnam War; we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision" (Nagel, 2007).

Another possible explanation for the lack of U.S. readiness may be overconfidence on the part of the U.S. due to the quick and overwhelming victory in the Gulf War. Undoubtedly, there are many examples from history of armies that were defeated because they underestimated their enemy. One area where an army cannot afford to underestimate its opponent is concerning their *will*. We will now begin to look at the most critical question we mentioned at the start of our discussion, the *why*.

There is a popular saying that "every war that has ever been fought has been about religion". That statement may not be completely true, but it may be true that every war ever fought has been about belief. Even the simplest conflict is ultimately some right one thinks they have, versus another's opinion that they do not have that right (whether freedom, right to rule, personal property, etc.). Today in the War on Terror, the "hearts and minds" campaign is an

extremely important issue, just as it was during the Vietnam era. When we talk about “hearts and minds”, we are actually talking about changing a belief system, at least to a certain extent, of an entire populous. That is a pretty lofty task, and it may seem like a job for philosophers or generals; but in truth, even the most junior Soldier is influencing a people, for good or bad, through their words and action, (as a side note, this was also addressed in the Small Wars Manual).

During Vietnam, our nation sought to stop the spread of Communism and promote Democracy. Today, Islamic “Extremists” seek to stop the spread of our “western philosophy”, which is (or at least used to be) based in Christianity. As a nation, we believe in and promote the freedom of all men, and other nations simply do not. The Founding Fathers, and a few political leaders today like Mike Huckabee, believed that there is absolute truth, and that rests in the Bible. What seems amazing, considering the War on Terror, is how many NCOs have no idea of either the teachings or history of Islam. If leaders seriously studied either of these topics, no doubt many would gasp in horror. Regardless of personal feelings about religious issues, NCOs should study religion, if only from a historical perspective. There is a trend in our nation not to “offend” anyone, so we stick our heads in the proverbial sand and, as a result, we are growing ignorant to issues that the rest of the world are not just talking about, but doing something about as well.

As we close, it is worth repeating a familiar saying espoused by numerous Army Senior Leaders, “... as Soldiers, we do not dictate policy, we simply go where we are told.” While that may be true, it does not mean Soldiers should be blindly obedient and never question motives. By studying history of all types, we can learn not only who, when, and how, but also the “why”. The United States is home to some of the most intelligent citizens and Soldiers in the world.

However, knowledge and intelligence do not always mandate the more important attribute of *wisdom*, which is what all leaders desperately need today.

Our Army's history is full of examples of leaders that gave morally and ethically questionable orders. Knowing the current state of our government, it is doubtful that anyone would seriously think that our politicians are incapable of potentially doing the same. How many Soldiers throughout history thought they served a noble and just king or emperor, only to slowly realize their government had become the very thing they once battled? In this tumultuous day and age, if we as leaders ignore the lessons of history, we may awake to find one day that we, as a nation, *are* history.

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