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Argumentative History Essay

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22 November, 2008

Class # 35 Student # 535

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Abstract

It is essential that Military leaders have a functioning knowledge of history. Former military campaigns are marred by lost battles and leadership failures. The lost battles and leadership failures are a direct reflection of leaders' misunderstanding of enemy tactics. Experiences examined from the past help define leadership failures that help develop new tactics that win on the battlefield today. All battles are written in history, by examining this information leaders can use their historical value to avoid mistakes and duplicate successes for future battles. There are many examples from wars Americans have fought in, I will concentrate on the history, theory, and doctrine of Spotsylvania during the Civil War and WWI Battle of the Argonne Forrest.

George Santiana in his book on *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress* 1906 said this on (p 284), “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” If key leaders don’t take into account the reasons why they have lost battles, then they won’t realize the need for a change. By carrying out the same scenario the same way is not going to give you different results. You must have a change of theory, doctrine and tactics to be successful on the battlefield.

Leaders that learn lessons quickly and take action decisively will end up winning the next battle. During the Civil War the Union and Confederate Armies used linear warfare tactics that the British and French used. General Grant from the Union Army and General Lee from the Confederate Army constantly tried to find solutions to end the war. What they didn’t take into account was tactical change needed to win battles. Emory Upton, a Lieutenant Colonel (LTC), in General Grant’s Union Army, had some great ideas to change the current tactics used in the war.

LTC Upton became the hero at Spotsylvania Court House due to his quick thinking that helped to save the Union from being defeated, by changing tactics. Grant’s command didn’t believe that his tactics would work and neither did General Grant. The battle at Spotsylvania Court House gave LTC Upton the chance to prove it would.

It was during this time that LTC Upton was granted the opportunity to try out his new tactic known as the assaulting in column. In Bruce Catton’s book 1968, *Grant Takes Command*; he states on (p 220), “Upton told his men to keep going without a halt and without firing a shot and he organized them in four compact lines, making an assaulting column that was narrow and deep.”

After the Spotsylvania battle General Grant promoted LTC Upton to Brigadier General for his outstanding effort in changing tactics. General Upton could see that change was needed simply by looking at the history of battles, coming up with a theory, changing doctrine, and using new tactics to win future battles. This was the changing point of victory for the Union army, by using this system of tactics Grant would later discover that Upton's theory combined with his tactics was key to the Union's victory. During Spotsylvania battle the leading role of the Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) changed. In the book, *The Story of the Non-commissioned Officer* 1946, it states this on (p 100),

As a battle went on, sergeants and corporals often found themselves assuming command of companies. In extreme cases, such as the charge of Pickett's Virginia division at Gettysburg in 1863, whole regiments lost their commissioned officers. The demonstrated ability of the NCOs to handle the burden of leadership in such cases permanently affected the corps' future status.

General Upton pushed his belief that the NCO can handle more responsibility as well to have leadership schooling as the officers did. In the book, *Guardians of the Republic*, Earnest F. Fischer, 1994 writes this quote about General Upton on paged 150, "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 the non-commissioned officers of our Army."

General Upton's goal was to twofold; one to provide the NCOs with the education needed to carry out duties in garrison and combat, two for the wages of the NCO to be greater than lower enlisted. Once the NCOs had some education their pay then increased causing the morale of the NCOs to increase. The time between the end of the Civil War and just before

World War I General Upton made some progress for the education and pay for NCOs. Because of his work and persistence the NCOs role would change for the better, but this took time to happen. Once the United States became involved in World War I the NCOs found themselves as small squad leaders and platoon leaders because of high casualty rate.

World War I was a very costly war to human life because of trench warfare. Trenches were laid out in many different ways; some were built like a jig saw puzzle, some in a straight line, and some in a jagged formation to keep artillery from directly hitting in the trenches. The battle zone from the English Channel to Switzerland was known as the Western Front and had become a stalemate shortly after the beginning of the war in 1914.

In order for the stalemate to end and bring an end to the war something had to change in tactics. The Germans made the first move to change tactical warfare to try and win the war. General Von Kuhl had a brilliant idea that would change tactics for the German army. What we now call the After Action Review (AAR) is what General Kuhl's idea was to make changes in tactics. In *The Leavenworth Papers 1981* by Timothy Luper states this on (p 17), "After battles, he had frontline officers meet at his headquarters to tell them about their experiences and their opinions." General Von Lossberg worked with General Kuhl in devising small groups of soldiers that would move fast and fight in depth with artillery set just right for advancing groups.

These small group goals were to use speed and depth in penetrating behind enemy lines causing disruption and confusion so that other groups could attack and take ground. On (p 44) of *The Leavenworth Papers 1981* is the term used, "A better term is "infiltration tactics." Infiltration is a satisfactory description of the infantry technique of bypassing resistance and pushing forward as far as possible."

The idea was great and it worked well, The Germans caught the allies off guard with the new tactics of small skirmishes attacking them in their trenches. All worked well until the Germans spread themselves too thin loosing too many soldiers to keep going, they realized that they could not keep the territory they fought for. The Germans had a great plan and executed it well but failed to capitalize on it and had to fall back to regroup to their trenches in defensive operations.

When the Germans fell back to defensive operations then the allies began their offensive operations with a change in tactics. During the Argonne Offensive the allies employed tanks for the first time with infantry support; this caused a great deal of concern for the German army. Tanks were new to the battlefield and used with infantry and artillery support became an effective change in doctrine and tactics, but the problem is that they could be disabled or destroyed easily.

Although the Germans were surprised, they quickly found a remedy by learning multiple ways of disabling tanks. The Germans quickly came up with armored piercing rounds that would go through the thin armor the tanks had. Along with the use of tanks the allies used platoon sized elements to infiltrate German trenches. The allied counteroffensive was the proving ground for the NCO, as officers were wounded and killed NCOs would take charge of these small teams and platoons to infiltrate the German defenses. These were different tactics that General Pershing developed by theory than made into doctrine for the battlefield.

One of the hero's of World War I was SGT Alvin York, a backwoods boy from the hills of Tennessee and an expert shot. General Pershing came to the conclusion that if they were to have victory over the Germans then it was going to be done by forcing them out of the trenches and into open ground. In the book World War I by S.L.A. Marshall 1964 he states on (p 338),

“From a kneeling position, York shot the machine gunners with his rifle. Charged by the greater part of a German platoon, he stopped them with the same weapon.” With the change in theory, doctrine and tactics during the battle of the Argonne Forest, the allies forced the Germans into the Armistice in the fall of 1918 and ended World War I.

The leaders from the Union Army didn't believe Upton's tactics would work, but they let him try to find that change worked. This led the leaders to develop a new theory to their doctrine and tactics, column formation fighting. NCOs during this time took command of whole units which prompted Upton to develop a way to educate the NCOs. These same lessons would be the doctrinal way the leaders would fight in World War I. The theory, doctrine and tactical changes changed in World War 1 by decentralizing battles, battles now being led by NCOs. World War 1 was won when leaders changed their doctrine, theory and tactics from lessons learned from past battles.

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