

Maneuver Leaders, Self-Study and War

by CPT Joseph Byerly

Three hundred men was the largest formation GEN George Washington had led before selection as the commander of the soon-to-be-formed Continental Army. He lacked experience to qualify for his newly assigned role. However, what he lacked in experience he made up for in self-study. Washington took his military education seriously, grasping every opportunity to increase his knowledge in the art of war. He bought every military science and history book he could find, making notes in the margins and eventually producing orders from them. In short, Washington was self-taught in the art of generalship.

Similarly, GEN George S. Patton Jr. was a voracious reader from his days at West Point to the time he commanded First Corps. He supplemented his own experience with the experience of past leaders. In a letter to his son, he wrote, “To be a successful soldier you must know history.”¹

More recently, retired U.S. Marine Corps GEN James Mattis observed, “Leaders ... do their troops a disservice by not studying (studying, vice reading) the men who have gone before us.”²

Even though these three leaders led during different periods of American history, the unifying theme running through their careers was the emphasis they placed on a lifelong study of war and warfare. They did not wait for their commanders or a learning institution to tell them what and when to read — they took ownership for their own development.

Importance of studying war, warfare

Learning from the experiences of others helps prepare leaders for future roles and responsibilities. Maneuver leaders are constantly in a state of upward mobility, usually spending no longer than two years at any given position of responsibility. Each new rank brings a change in scope of responsibility, complexity of problem sets and type of leadership challenges. It is for these reasons that self-study is critical. Leaders who study war and warfare build a repertoire of secondhand experiences from which they can call upon to use

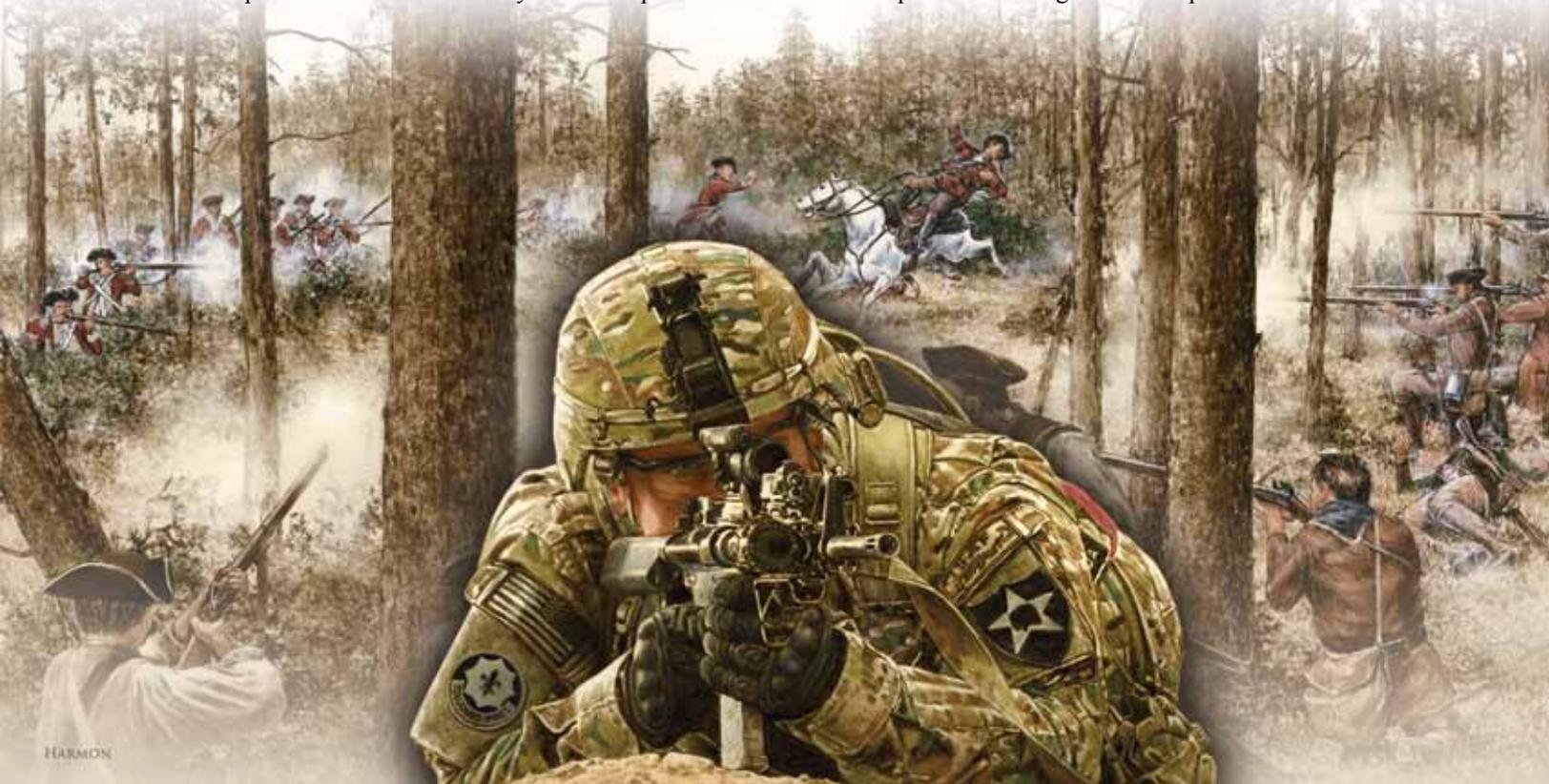
in informing their vision, actions and responses. The vicarious knowledge gained through a study of the past enables practitioners of war to see familiar patterns of activity. It also helps develop potential solutions to tactical and operational problems.³ Instead of starting from scratch and learning through trial and error, a prior study of previous experiences enables leaders to start where history leaves off; rapidly identify opportunities; and quickly seize, retain and exploit the initiative.

Studying war and warfare helps us understand the continuities of war (those things that have not changed much in 5,000 years), thus guarding against unrealistic silver-bullet solutions to complex problems. In the 1990s, proponents of the “revolution in military affairs,” “military transformation” and a “new American way of war” argued that technology would lift the fog of war. Near-certainty in war, combined with precision strike capabilities, would make wars fast, cheap, efficient and decisive. Lessons in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed flaws in these concepts. They neglected the interaction with enemies and adversaries who adopted traditional countermeasures like dispersion, concealment and decentralized command and control,⁴ requiring us to fight in close combat with our enemies for periods that might outlast popular perceptions. These interactions ensure no one capability or one service or one arm is decisive. By studying war and warfare, leaders are able to see the wrestling match that takes place between the offense and the defense: the machinegun led to the tank; the tank led to the antitank missile; the bomber led to the radar; the submarine led to the sonar.

Approach to study of war, warfare

The benefits of studying war and warfare depend on the alignment with a proper approach. In the “Use and Abuse of Military History,”⁵ Sir Michael Howard recommends the following three rules:

- First, study in *width*: Observe how warfare has developed over a long historical period.



- Next, study in *depth*: Take one campaign or battle and examine it in minute detail. Read letters, memoirs, diaries and even historical fiction. This is important, Howard observed, because as the “tidy outline dissolves,” we “catch a glimpse of the confusion and horror of real experience.”
- Lastly, study in *context*. One must understand warfare for its social, cultural, economic, human, moral, political and psychological contexts because, as Howard observed, “The roots of victory and defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield.” Failure to study wars in context leads to a superficial view of war with lessons and conclusions divorced from their proper environment.

Where to go

Professional-reading lists are the most prominent resource used to guide leader self-study in the military services.⁶ A popular method for promoting professional reading is through the creation of these lists divided into recommended reading by rank. While these selections may provide officers and noncommissioned officers with a list of useful pieces of literature, many subordinates are not privy to the explanation of the selection of books or articles in the first place. Thus, many of the professional-reading guides can seem to be no more than laundry lists. For this reason, I prefer a new resource recently developed by the Maneuver Center of Excellence: the Maneuver Leader Self-Study Program.

The program’s intent is to give maneuver leaders a guided self-development program we can use for the study of war and warfare throughout our careers. The self-study program is divided into the 20 topics found at <http://www.benning.army.mil/mssp/>. Each topic has a brief introduction explaining what it is and why it is important. The Website offers an approach to the study of the topic along with downloadable doctrine, articles, audio/video and recommended books. Carefully chosen, the topics provide us with the interdisciplinary approach required to study war in width, depth and context.

Incorporating self-study into unit leader-development programs

Even though it was established for personal study, the program is a great resource for commanders to use in developing their subordinates. Reading, followed by discussion, is a critical component of our growth as professionals and improves our ability to retain knowledge. Reading by itself is not enough; in the book *Past is Prologue: the Importance of History to the Military Profession*, Richard Hart Sinnerich observed that “extracting value from the study of history requires active mentorship.”⁷ Leaders should discuss what they are reading, since “junior officers develop their sense of what matters professionally in large measure by observing their superiors. If the latter are willing to invest precious time in reading and discussing history, so too will their subordinates, and conversely.”⁸ Leaders can use the MLSSP as a guide to introduce themes to subordinate leaders and facilitate discussion. A battalion commander preparing for a battalion-level training event might use the combined-arms operations topic to set the stage for the upcoming field problem. A first sergeant wanting to discuss leader development with junior NCOs could use an article and questions from the military leadership or leader-development topics to guide an NCO development program. If commanders select an article or topic each month to read and discuss with their

subordinates, leaders could have a program of development that spans the entire length of a command.

Conclusion

The study of war and warfare should be an imperative for all maneuver leaders. It is a lifelong effort one must approach systematically over the course of a career. Clausewitz opined that the purpose of studying war was to sharpen judgment before the battle began, not to dictate decisions during it. Self-study does not cost money or even require extensive training resources; the rewards reaped from this practice have been proven on the battlefields of the past. With the MLSSP, leaders now have a well-researched program to guide them in their education and prepare themselves and their units for the complexities and realities of the modern battlefield.



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Notes

- ¹ Nye, Roger H., *The Patton Mind*, New York: Avery Press, 1993.
- ² Murray, Williamson, and Sinnreich, Richard Hart, “Introduction,” in *Past as Prologue: the Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- ³ Vego, Milan, “Military History and the Study of Operational Art,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 57, 2nd Quarter, 2010.
- ⁴ Johnson, David, *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza*, Rand Corporation, 2011.
- ⁵ Howard, Michael, “The Use and Abuse of Military History,” *Royal United Service Institute Journal*, 107, February 1962.
- ⁶ Lemay, Curtis, *Technology-Supported Self-Development for Soldiers Deploying to Afghanistan*, Fort Leavenworth: Army Command and General Staff College.
- ⁷ Sinnreich, Richard Hart, “Awkward Partners: Military History and American Military Education,” in *Past as Prologue: the Importance of History to the Military Profession*, ed. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- ⁸ Ibid.

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

MLSSP — Maneuver Leader Self Study Program
NCO — noncommissioned officer