

# The Importance of Studying Military History

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*“Let him read and meditate upon the wars of the great captains: It is the only way to learn the art of war.”*  
— Napoleon<sup>1</sup>

Military professionals have debated the usefulness and value of studying military history for centuries. The debate within the U.S. Army has ebbed and flowed depending on the Army’s operations tempo (OPTEMPO) or leaders’ emphasis and beliefs about the “practicality” of studying military history for the average serving military professional. I believe the study of military history is critical and mandatory for the development of well-rounded and effective Army professionals.

The study of military history informs the long-term development of military professionals in three ways. First, studying history nurtures and cultivates critical- and creative-thinking skills. It is imperative that military professionals possess these skills, especially as military operations become more complex and the time available for leaders to make decisions decreases. Second, the study of military history allows military professionals to develop, adapt, and evaluate current doctrine. Lastly, military history develops military professionals by exposing them to prior examples and experiences before they are personally tested in combat.

The positive benefits of exploring military history allow leaders to learn the art of war from others’ experiences, which is critical for the military profession and the success of our force in future conflicts. Michael Howard described the nature of the military profession and the frequency with which a military professional might exercise his or her duty in war as “almost unique that he may have to exercise it only once in a lifetime, if indeed that often. It is as if a surgeon had to practice throughout his life on dummies for one real operation; or a barrister appeared only once or twice in court towards the close of his career; or a professional swimmer had to spend his life practicing on dry land for an Olympic championship on which the fortunes of his entire nation depended.”<sup>2</sup>

As military professionals, we owe it to our organizations and the nation to be ready when called upon. We routinely conduct realistic and demanding training, but one often neglected element in our preparation for future war is developing a deeper and richer understanding of military history in our Army professionals and within our Army organizations.

## **Develops Critical- and Creative-Thinking Skills**

Our Army should use the study of military history to challenge and develop officers over the length of their careers. Without a doubt, this initiative should be driven by the institutional Army. However, individual military professionals should strive to improve in these areas through their own self-development plans as well. An easy way to begin this journey is to start with your current unit’s organizational history. We owe it to our Soldiers to tie their current service to that of those who came before us, and knowing our unit history is a way to make those connections. This builds pride in the force and inspires Soldiers to live and work to the high standard of those who served in their unit before them.

Knowing and talking about unit lineage is an excellent way to discuss military history in the operational force. History in the institutional Army is also a difficult subject to teach and study. Some professional military educational (PME) programs superficially cover military history and miss the mark on truly gaining



**During a staff ride at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania, a military historian describes the battlefield situation to Soldiers from the 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard, on 12 June 2022. (Photo by SFC Devlin Drew)**

the benefits of deep military history study. Often consisting of disjointed and brief wave-top discussions of battles, campaigns, and military leaders, this approach does not allow students to truly understand historical events or the full context in which the events take place.

In “Military History, Is It Still Practicable,” Jay Luvaas cites Field Marshal Earl Wavell as saying, “the real way to get value out of the study of military history is to take particular situations, and as far as possible get inside the skin of the man who made a decision and then see in what way you could have improved upon it.”<sup>3</sup> Wavell’s approach takes time and a deliberate effort, but it allows students to truly exercise their critical- and creative-thinking skills. These skills are required to develop successful commanders and staff officers capable of winning on the modern battlefield.

Techniques such as requiring students to conduct a thorough battle analysis, like the requirement at the Maneuver Captain’s Career Course (MCCC), are excellent opportunities that require students to study the decisions and actions made by prior commanders to learn from those experiences. Additionally, conducting a staff ride is another opportunity to learn from military history and get firsthand context to the conditions previous commanders experienced as they participated in a military operation. These techniques exist in our modern PME system but should increase to allow students more opportunities to participate in these educational events. Additionally, focusing on the self-development domain in regard to military history should be a requirement for leaders in the operational force. This would ensure these skills are continuously developed throughout the length of an officer’s career and not just occur while the Soldier is a student enrolled in PME.

### **Develop and Evaluate Current Doctrine**

The consistent and deep study of military history equips military professionals to better understand, implement, evaluate, and develop U.S. Army doctrine. In the shadow of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and as we shift to a focus on large-scale combat operations (LSCO), it is the perfect time for the Army to reflect, learn, and review our current doctrine. In 2010, Robert Scales warned against the failure to maintain a

learning organization by stating, “my sense is that the military has begun to circle X its officer seed corn. A bias toward active service in our protracted small wars is making our military an institution too busy to learn.”<sup>4</sup> Scales warned against an emphasis on action over education and offered ways the Army could promote and reward scholarship for military professionals. The continuous exploration of military history will equip military professionals to develop more effective doctrine and provide leaders with additional lenses to view the effectiveness of our current doctrine.

Studying the evolution of our military doctrine will provide context for military leaders currently trying to understand the Army’s new operating concept — multidomain operations (MDO).<sup>5</sup> Military history will equip leaders with an appreciation of the historical consistencies within MDO and better illuminate what is new and different in the doctrine. This understanding will allow leaders to better analyze if and how our MDO concept addresses the current operational environment or the challenges our pacing threats pose to our ability to conduct successful military operations.

This could require military professionals to progressively work on a thesis project, periodically publish in professional journals, or require top performers to teach, observe, coach, or develop doctrine periodically throughout their career.

The need to evaluate and develop better military doctrine is not the sole responsibility of Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate (CADD) doctrine writers and developers. All Army professionals owe it to their units and the force to evaluate doctrine’s effectiveness when conducting home-station collective-level training or a combat training center (CTC) rotation. Feedback from the force of doctrine applied during training or operations allows leaders to strengthen our doctrine by understanding what does and doesn’t work. Additionally, CTC observer-coach-trainers and PME instructors should be heavily grounded in military history to better assist them in their official duties and could actively promote historical examples as a way of relating and connecting experiences of their training audience to the greater historical legacy their operations originated from.

### **Learn From Others/Gain Experience**

Lastly, and more commonly, military history is a great tool to train military professionals without having to actually conduct military operations. This benefit can be implemented as an annual training type requirement or through mechanisms discussed in previous paragraphs. Military professionals should have an area of expertise that assists them in better understanding the complex character of warfare and exercises their judgement by replicating future situations they may find themselves in.

Clausewitz’s concept of coup d’oeil, or inward eye, refers to the “quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection.”<sup>6</sup> All Army professionals should develop and cultivate their individual coup d’oeil regardless of their duty position as a commander, staff officer, or functional area officer. Deep and deliberate study of military history is one of the best ways to develop your individual coup d’oeil. Studying military history and exploring what others have done in similar situations builds your ability to recognize “the truth” in any military context. It is important that Clausewitz highlighted “long study and reflection” as the means to develop coup d’oeil and not training or practical experience. Long study and reflection can come after training and personal experience, but the unlimited opportunity to learn from others through the study of military history is what the great theorist was referring to.

### **Conclusion**

The study of military history to empower the current Army professional is an underappreciated tool that should be emphasized and leveraged in every unit’s leader development program and in individual self-development programs. Studying history can be intimidating for some who may not know how to begin their journey or may be hesitant in not wanting to draw the wrong lessons or insights from historical experience. Antulio Echevarria II expertly cautioned against some of the troubles and pitfalls of studying military

history in his article, "The Trouble with History."<sup>7</sup> However, his warning is no excuse not to incorporate deep and meaningful study of military history in PME. Nor does Echevarria's warning abdicate our leaders' responsibility to leverage the benefits of studying military history throughout their careers.

The long-term study of military history will benefit military professionals by improving their critical- and creative-thinking skills; improving their ability to evaluate, implement, and develop doctrine; and acting as a training and education tool during periods of low OPTEMPO. The study of military history is greater than the ability to recall historical facts or extrapolate solutions from previous historical examples to solve current military problems. Professor Michael Howard perhaps said it best: "...it must never be forgotten that the true use of history, military or civil, is, as Jacob Burckhardt once said, not to make men clever for the next time; it is to make them wise forever."<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jay Luvaas, "Military History: Is It Still Practicable?" *Parameters* 12 (March 1982): 9.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *Parameters* 11/1 (1981): 13.

<sup>3</sup> Luvaas, "Military History," 10.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Scales, "Too Busy to Learn," *Army History*, No. 76 (Summer 2010): 28.

<sup>5</sup> Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, October 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria II, "The Trouble with History," *Parameters* 35 (Summer 2005): 78-90.

<sup>8</sup> Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," 14.

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