

Applied History — Tips for Training Troops

LT COL M.W. WHITCHURCH, BRITISH ARMY

“Fools learn from experience. I prefer to learn from the experience of others.”

– Otto Von Bismarck

This short article is a reaction to MAJ Shameek De Lancy’s important case for the study of military history that appeared in the Winter 2023-2024 issue of *Infantry*.¹ We know the better troops train the less they bleed in war. But how do we learn from military history and use it to train for war? Here are some proven tips for ways leaders can incorporate the study of military history into unit training. They have served me well and continue to be of use.

Tip 1 — Use directed readings with discussion.

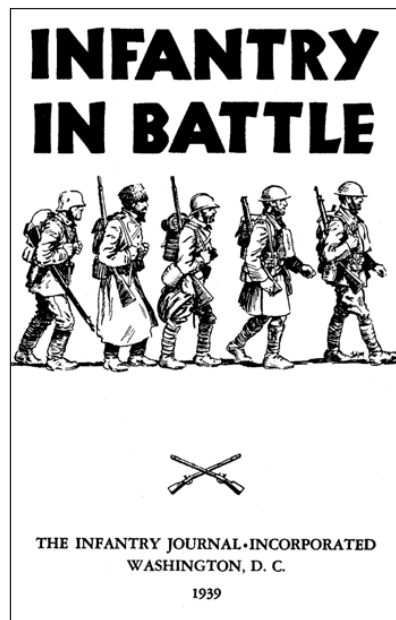
Infantry in Battle is an excellent resource. This book, which is available online from Army University Press, is composed of a collection of highly instructive examples of infantry fighting from several armies during World War 1.² It is concise, backed with good maps and superb analysis.

How to use: Select one case and have Soldiers read it; when complete, they can then answer designated questions which will then be discussed during an organized discussion — the more participation, the better.

An example: Go to Chapter 17, “Fire of Machine Guns.” Invite Soldiers to study examples 1 and 3 along with the conclusion. Give them 40 minutes to read and discuss in small groups, tackling these simple questions:

1. Identify one good lesson from these examples.
2. What were the reasons for the attacker’s success in this battle?

When the 40 minutes are up, bring the small groups together for discussion. Ask the small groups to each offer their answers. Decide how to develop the discussion based on what lessons you want Soldiers to take away.



Points to watch: Organize your class into small groups of three or four Soldiers. See that all have a chance to speak. Embed the maps into Powerpoint slides and require the groups to reference them as they provide their answers. (Use laser pointers!) Also watch the time as it often goes too quickly. You could ask Soldiers to read the examples before your class; however, there may be challenges with this as some will not complete the reading ahead of time. It's best to allot 25 minutes to complete the reading, 15 minutes for small group discussion, and then 20 minutes for discussion with the entire group.

Tip 2 — Utilize online video-sharing platforms such as YouTube.

In many ways this tip is similar to the first. The idea is for the class to watch a clip from a movie and discuss. As with the previous tip, after watching the clip, Soldiers should be organized into small groups to prepare answers to designated questions.

How to use: Introduce the lesson and goals, explain the questions, allow small groups to identify their answers, and then confirm during a class discussion.

An example: Watch Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's speech from the 1993 movie *Gettysburg* where he persuades Soldiers from another battalion to fight with his regiment; a clip can easily be found on YouTube.³ Questions for this selection could include:

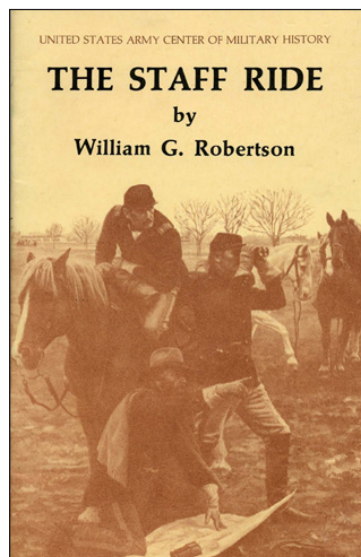
1. Why was Colonel Chamberlain successful? Give examples.
2. What do you see from this leader?

Points to watch: For instructors, it is a good idea to watch this movie from start to finish. When the 20th Maine Regiment comes into the scene, watch how Colonel Chamberlain brings back order and restores morale. This movie is full of good teaching points.

Tip 3 — Examine the terrain on staff rides.

Some readers may already know the value of conducting staff rides, and William G. Robertson's pamphlet, *The Staff Ride*, is an excellent resource.⁴ This method of training, however, is only as good as the skill of the instructor. Here are some points to consider:

- Does the ground of the former battlefield tell a story? If you have selected the location with care, it will. Far too often, units will assemble at a site, undergo a lecture that could have been done in a classroom, and then discuss operations but not use the ground! You may rightly ask why you are there if the ground is not used.
- Equally, the use of binoculars is rare — yet it can help develop the eye for terrain. Instructors should





Leaders with the U.S. Army Southern European Task Force, Africa, conduct a staff ride at the Military Memorial of Monte Grappa in Italy. (Photo by SSG Abanda Solomon)

survey the terrain in preparation for the event. For example, if visiting Manassas National Battlefield Park, the site of the First Battle of Bull Run in 1861, examine the reverse slope where General Stonewall Jackson's troops waited for the attackers. No wonder his brigade was successful!

- After describing the terrain and situation, invite Soldiers to offer their insights. Antietam National Battlefield would provide much discussion. Equally, at Fredericksburg Battlefield, the field of fire by the defending artillery at the southern flank distinctly shows why the attackers failed — clearly less so with Little Round Top at Gettysburg in 1863.

Tip 4 — The case for sound: Use audiobook resources.

When staff colleges and the like issue reading lists, it is unrealistic to expect all will read every book. Part of the problem is not enough time. This is where audiobook resources come in. So, when walking the dog or driving home, try an audio book. This is a clever way to learn.

How to use: Provide Soldiers with instructions on how to download a certain book and have them listen to a selected chapter and then answer questions as part of a discussion.

An example: One suggested book is COL (Retired) David Hackworth's *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior*. His recollections as a battalion commander in Vietnam are very enlightening. Frankly, the book is brilliant. I recommend listening to Chapter 22, "Issues and Answers." Only 22 minutes long,



it is thought-provoking and gives sobering insights. Then, ask participants to identify two lessons for the Army today as well as a personal lesson. Just watch their reactions. Listen to Hackworth's point about Hamburger Hill or the dangers of careerists in war. This is a must for any army.

Tip 5 — Conduct common-sense training.

In 1981, our U.S. exchange officer sent me to stay with a U.S. engineer battalion for two weeks in Germany. At the time, the book *Common Sense Training* by LTG Arthur S. Collins Jr. had just been republished.⁵ This book covers the history of training from 1950-1978. It is the thinking leader's guide to successful training; LTG Collins was certainly gifted.

For example: Using the approach from Tip 1, have the class read Chapter 2, "Common Excuses for Inadequate Training." A suggested question to discuss: How do we tackle these excuses and make our training better? On page 111, LTG Collins describes how the German Army used training films. I have used this tip with great success.

Training Is Everything...

Look to any successful army and the way they trained is often one of the biggest reasons for their success. Following MAJ De Lancey's article, I wanted to share these applied history tips and hope they help you as they have helped me.

Notes

¹ MAJ Shameek De Lancey, "The Importance of Studying Military History," *Infantry* 112/4 (Winter 2023-2024): 48-50.

² *Infantry in Battle* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Incorporated, 1939), available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/infantry-in-battle.pdf>.

³ "Colonel Joshua Chamberlain Speech," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZpQ5W1AV0g/>.

⁴ William Robertson, *The Staff Ride* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1987), https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/educational-services/staff-rides/CSI_CMH_Pub_70-21.pdf.

⁵ LTG (Retired) Arthur S. Collins Jr., *Common Sense Training: A Working Philosophy for Leaders* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978).

Lt Col Matthew Whitchurch of the Royal Engineers is the sixth generation of his family to serve in the British Army. During his 44 years of service, he has served as an instructor at two staff colleges and the British equivalent of the Joint Readiness Training Center. Lt Col Whitchurch has led countless staff rides since 1992 and is currently busy serving in the Baltic States and Poland for NATO. He is a regular writer for the *Royal Engineers Journal*, contributing numerous articles on land warfare.

