

Military History Its Importance Today

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It is not unusual to hear someone argue that the study of military history is of little value in solving current tactical problems. This is certainly not a new argument. For example, Lord Seaton, one of Wellington's officers during the Peninsular Wars against Napoleon I, was once asked how a man could gain proficiency in the art of war. Lord Seaton replied, "By fighting, Sir, and a great deal of it." No doubt this distinguished officer meant to imply that a little practice is worth a great deal of theory.

But consider a most telling comment made by Frederick the Great:

A mule who has carried a pack for ten campaigns under Prince Eugene will be no better a tactician for it, and it must be confessed, to the disgrace of humanity, that many men grow old in an otherwise respectable profession without making any greater progress than that mule.

I certainly do not belittle the value of war experience. After all, Prince Eugene's mule lacked the mental creativity to apply its own unique war experience. Today, though, there are only limited opportunities for military leaders to gain first-hand experience in warfare and to profit from that experience. Substitutes, therefore, must be found to prepare our tactical leaders for the actual experience of war. And while the Army has developed a number of excellent tactical leadership training methods, this training

must be supplemented by a study of the tactical lessons of the past, because it is precisely through this kind of study that our leaders can develop the mental flexibility they will need on the modern battlefield.

I do not hold that the study of military history will make all tactical leaders brilliant, or that it will confer resolution and rapid decision making abilities on those who are timid and irresolute by nature. But the quick, the resolute, and the daring, recognized for their sound decisions and rapid actions, will be all the more likely to decide and act correctly in battle if they further their study of the art of war.

OBJECTIVES

Military history may be studied with different objectives—to learn strategic lessons and the higher branches of the art of war, or to extract from the readings tactical lessons that are still applicable to the conditions of our own time.

For our purposes, the first of these objectives deserves only a brief comment. It is sometimes argued that only officers who aspire to high command or hold important positions on high level staffs should find it necessary to study strategic lessons from history. This idea is either an impudent excuse for idleness or an ab-

ject admission that this branch of the military art is utterly beyond the capacity of the ordinary leader. Every tactical leader must study the historical foundations of current strategic doctrine if he expects to understand that doctrine and insure its correct application at the operational and tactical levels.

If this view of the need to study strategic lessons is accepted, what about the study of tactics? The study of tactics must develop from the foundations taught at the service schools into a committed study of tactics in the field. Studying and contemplating the tactical lessons of the past is important to all professional soldiers.

Determining how to study tactics, though, is not without considerable difficulty. Whatever may be said of the immutability of the principles of war, there can be no question that the constant changes and improvements in weapons alone profoundly affect tactics. Accordingly, it is foolish to imply that past tactical lessons can be blindly applied to today's tactical challenges. This being the case, it may be difficult to comprehend what today's professional soldier can learn from studying the battle of Agincourt in 1415 or firefights in the Vietnam war.

Perhaps the best way to overcome this difficulty is to recognize that two basic historical methods are used to analyze

past tactics. First, there is the speculative method, which, from the study of armaments, new inventions, weapon testing, and incidents on the battlefield, tries to identify and analyze the changes that have taken place in tactical principles from previous battles. Second, there is the method that concentrates on actual war experiences. This method also considers the modifications to tactical principles that new arms and appliances may produce, but it is more concerned with the similar conditions that ruled the past battles. This method traces the continuities in tactical principles.

The professional soldier should be a student of both methods, for the study of history matures the professional's judgment and perception without involving him in the actual violence of past battles. It gives the professional soldier an appreciation of the realities of combat, and recognizes that man is the fundamental instrument of war. The vivid descriptions of how rain, mud, protective clothing, fatigue, and the leader's will affected soldiers and tactics at Agincourt and in Vietnam can take on new meaning. Combined with a sound study of current tac-

tical principles, these will enable the professional leader to discriminate between what he can accept as applicable to the present day and what he must reject as inappropriate.

Currently, the analysis of tactical lessons in military history has taken on a variety of forms to supplement the available historical monographs: staff rides, map exercises, terrain models, visual effects, and copies of original correspondence. Each of these, however, remains closely associated with the historical time period of the particular battle. Thus, this kind of analysis is only the first step in uncovering and understanding the tactical lessons of the past.

The next step is to concentrate on the leaders. The student must place himself in the commanders' shoes and in their minds. He must examine their backgrounds and experiences, and then reconstruct their thought processes during the battle. This is not something new. Frederick II of Prussia implored his officers to go beyond memorizing the military exploits of any commander and "work hard mainly to examine thoroughly his overall views and particularly to learn how

to think in the same way."

The student can also gain experience through an imaginative participation in the experiences of others. When he is studying, or out on a staff ride to a battlefield, he should not only envision the past tactical situation but also speculate about those tactical lessons that may be applicable today.

Studying military history with imagination and vision is the key to applying the tactical lessons of the past to the tactical challenges of the present. By exercising their minds in this manner, professional soldiers gain experience, and this is what distinguishes the competent professional from Prince Eugene's mule.

A constant dialogue between the lessons of the past and the tactical challenges of the present and future can heighten our ability to recognize those challenges, analyze all the possibilities and then take decisive action.

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Aerial Photography

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All branches of the military service rely upon the products of aerial photography. Although rapid and highly technological advances have been made in the systems used to acquire and produce air photos, the two principal military applications of aerial photography are still map-making and intelligence.

The military applications of aerial photography date back to the Civil War when innovative commanders tried to use "balloon photography" to obtain information about enemy positions. It was not until World War I, however, that aerial photography was first recognized as a military

necessity. By then, it had become apparent that, apart from its immediate application to intelligence activities, aerial photographs could be used to produce new maps or to revise outdated ones in a relatively short time.

World War II provided the conditions under which aerial photography was able to grow from an art into a science. Military usage was based upon involvement in worldwide operations, the need for both strategical and tactical intelligence, and the requirement for thousands of time-sensitive maps. It was during this period when aerial photography achieved paramount

importance with the rapid development of photogrammetry, for which aerial photos provided the basic source of map data.

In addition to its value to map-making, some sources have concluded, aerial photography during the war provided military experts with almost 90 percent of their intelligence information.

The development of military aerial reconnaissance capabilities continued through the Korean conflict and the Cuban crisis. In Vietnam, practically every movement made by U.S. troops demanded aerial reconnaissance, because the terrain greatly favored the guerrilla tactics