

THE VALUE OF HISTORY FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that the study of military history is vital to military professionals not because it provides answers, but because it helps us understand the problems. This paper attempts to demonstrate the value of studying history for military professionals while pointing out some common pitfalls and errors that are routinely made in both the study of history and in attempting to draw meaningful conclusions from history. It also attempts to point out ways in which to avoid these pitfalls. Finally, it attempts to demonstrate exactly how history can best be employed by military professionals.

The Value of History for Military Professionals

The study of military history is vital to military professionals, but if we expect to find easy answers we are headed for disaster. What the study of history does do is help us understand the problems. George Santayana said “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” (Wisdom Quotes2008) which is a statement that is certainly true, the problem is that throughout history military professionals have studied history only to repeat it anyway. Usually this results from the practice of looking to history for answer. History rarely provides answers to problems however much we might wish it could. What history can and does provide to those who look for it is an understanding of the problems themselves. We are still left with the need to find answers, but that is much easier when we understand the problem thoroughly before we start as well as having a grasp of what answers were tried before. Exactly what those answers were is not as important as a thorough analysis of them to determine why each succeeded or failed. Even the answers that worked previously are unlikely to do so again, but learning why will give us the tactical and technical tools we need to find the answers we’re looking for.

Why History Can Mislead Us

History lies! Get used to it. It’s okay though, as long as we’re aware that history lies and more importantly how and why it lies, we can still use it to our advantage. Inaccuracies creep into history in several ways, but there are two main ones that we need to be aware of. The first occurs in the initial sources, that is, the point where someone personally involved in or observing the event records what happened. Sometimes the inaccuracies are completely innocent; soldiers in combat routinely have very different recollections of what happened in a firefight, even if they were side by side throughout the action. Other times the inaccuracies are self serving, the individual making the recollection is trying to inflate his importance or justify some questionable action he may have taken. The second comes later when a historian is trying to write something

based on the primary sources. Sometimes the historian in question isn't as discriminating as he should be in evaluating his sources and sometimes he has no choice as the only sources available are somewhat questionable.

A well known saying, sometimes attributed to Winston Churchill, but dating back in one form or another at least to Plato, goes "History is written by the victors". In the last two hundred years it would be more accurate to say history is written by the first one to get to the newspapers. An example of this familiar to 150 years worth of Cavalry Troopers surrounds the "Traditional Event" of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment that resulted in the Regimental Motto "Remember your Regiment and follow your officers. The event took place at the battle of Resaca de la Palma in the early days of the Mexican War as Zachary Taylor was driving south into Mexico. According to the traditional history on May 9th, 1846 Captain May of the 2nd Dragoons led a charge at a battery of Mexican cannon that captured the guns as well as the commanding general of the Mexican forces there, doing much to ensure the success of American forces that day. As he led off the charge he is quoted as uttering the words of the motto. The reality was somewhat different. Captain May did lead a charge and did capture the guns, but he led that charge well past the guns and down a sunken road that had two regiments of Mexican infantry resting on either side of it. He lost control of his men and abandoned most of them making it safely back to the American lines with only six of his Dragoons following. One of the others to make it back safely was the bugler who grabbed a Mexican soldier and swung him up in his horse to use as a human shield on the retreat. The human shield turned out to be the Mexican commander, providing the basis for that part of the legend. General Taylor relieved May on the spot sending in a regiment of regular infantry to retake the guns and "This time by god keep them". May was sent to the rear in disgrace where he ran into a newspaper report. The reporter wanted to know what was going on and Captain May spun him a tale of heroism that, through the miracle of the telegraph, hit the eastern newspapers the next day. By the time Taylor was ready to convene a

court martial to deal with Captain May, his brevet promotion to Lieutenant Colonel had arrived from Washington and the War Department. The last word on the subject was probably uttered by the bugler who referred to Captain May as “The cowardly humbug of the war”. (Urwin, 1983, *The United States Cavalry; An Illustrated History, 1776-1944*) There are serious books written by respected historians that relate the traditional version of events as well as ones that have the more accurate one. The historians who use the traditional version aren’t intentionally lying to us, they just depended on the newspaper reports of the day for their source material. The more accurate versions use other sources such as the official reports and Taylor’s memoirs.

Another way history misleads us stems from the historians themselves. When reading history we have to keep in mind that historians are human beings, each with their own agenda or “axe to grind”. When a historian writes a book or article, they are doing it for a purpose and only very rarely, if ever, is that purpose simply to record what happened. More typically, the historian is trying to prove a point of some kind. They’ve got a thesis or hypothesis and it their job to prove it. As the previous example shows, there are many sources of “facts” and a historian will frequently cite only those sources that support his hypothesis while ignoring others. This isn’t lying or even inaccurate really, but if we don’t know what was left out, we could be left with false impressions of what actually happened. It’s not just history where we find this, watch Fox News for half an hour, then watch CNN. Pay attention to how they cover the same stories. Neither is lying, but one can be led to very different conclusions by the spin placed on the facts.

Dealing with this in a way that allows history to have real value to us is much the same as dealing with the news. As long as we’re aware of which network we are watching and what their bias is, (be it liberal, conservative, or just trying to sell advertising time) we can get a reasonably accurate picture of what actually is happening, especially if we get our news from multiple sources. With historians it’s safe to assume each has an axe to grind and their version of events will be skewed by which axe they are grinding. The trick is to know exactly which axe they’ve

got. Luckily a lot of historians, particularly in articles, will tell you right up front what their thesis is. When they don't, it behooves us to do some research on the historians themselves. Stephen Ambrose for example wrote prolifically, particularly about World War II. A little research will reveal that he was also President Eisenhower's biographer and grew to know him as well as anyone outside of his immediate family. With this in mind, when we read his invariably positive (sometimes almost worshipful) portrayals of General Eisenhower, we can reverse engineer what is written to draw more meaningful conclusions. Reading John Keegan, an English historian on a par with Ambrose, writing on the same events will add to our understanding. One thing we can count on: the truth is usually somewhere in the middle.

The first step in constructively using history to help us as military professionals is developing an accurate understanding of what actually happened. The next step is to put it in context. A history book will sometimes explain clearly the context of events surrounding the theme of the book, but often the author will assume that the context is understood. This is even more often the case with scholarly articles because they are generally written for others with a common understanding of the situation. Studying the battle of Resaca de la Palma will only make sense if we understand the political situation that placed Taylor's Army in South Texas as well as the battle of Palo Alto that took place the day before. If one is studying a battle and doesn't know the context, why the armies were there, how they got there, what were their objectives were. Remember that Gettysburg happened where and how it did because the Confederates needed shoes and Buford liked the ground in front of the Seminary, not because either Meade or Lee decided that "Here is where we destroy the enemy". Standing on Seminary Ridge looking up at the angle across the Emmitsburg Road one wonders "What was Lee thinking?" We have to understand the context: Lee had to attack or else go home without a battle. Lee didn't think southern morale could stand such an expedition ending without at least one hard fought battle. Lee honestly believed that his troops were unstoppable. Only when we

understand this can we understand why Lee accepted battle at Gettysburg and why on the third day he launched the attack that became known as Pickett's charge. (Foote, 1963, *The Civil War, A Narrative, Fredericksburg to Meridian*)

How History Can Help Us

With an accurate picture of events and the context to evaluate it we are ready to start analysis, but we aren't out of danger yet. This is the point where people want to look for answers. This is the easy way out and the end result is often something like the Maginot Line. The best military minds the French possessed studied The Great War (what we now call World War I) and saw that entrenched troops with machine guns stopped any attack. They took this answer and built an immense and outrageously expensive system of fortifications known as the Maginot Line believing that they were immune from any conceivable German offensive. In May of 1940, of course, the Germans went around it. This does not mean that the history they thought they knew was inaccurate or that they hadn't put it in context. They just took the easy way out in assuming that what worked once will work always. What they should have done is studied why it worked, the reasons behind the tactic's success, and then analyzed each reason in light of changing technology. They also should have studied why the attacks on such positions didn't work. This information would have turned out to be much more valuable to them than why the defense did work. They might have realized that the problem was not achieving a penetration, but rather sustaining the momentum and penetrating deeply enough that reinforcements couldn't seal off the break. They might have seen that this was due in part to the difficulties of moving supplies and men up to reinforce the push which stemmed largely from the men having to walk and the supplies moving in horse drawn wagons. At the beginning of World War II the French possessed more and better tanks than the Germans, but they were unable to draw the same conclusions the Germans did. The main difference was the French studied what did work and German general staff studied what didn't.

This highlights another point that military professionals must always remember. The other side has its own military professionals too and if we assume they aren't as smart as we are, we could be in real trouble. We can assume that any potential enemy is also looking to history for solutions. If we look at what worked and then devise ways to beat it the next time, we may have worked out what an adversary is likely to try the next time around. The enemy certainly won't be trying what didn't work the last time. The next step is to devise ways of beating what we think the enemy will try. This is the proper use of history for military professionals! History and its understanding is the critical start point, but only the start point. We should treat it like it was Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield. Assume the enemy knows what you do and use that knowledge to figure out his most likely and most dangerous courses of action. Then you are on your way to using history to ensure your own success. If we only do what worked before, we are doing exactly what our adversaries expect and there is no surer way to hand your enemy a cheap victory.

At a tactical level there is an additional way to use history to our benefit. With the exception of unique situations created by new technology, it is safe to say that there is nothing truly new in the world. This is true of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP's) we use to fight our battles as well. There are lots of ways to fight a battle, but almost all of them have been tried before. Knowing them all is impossible, but even if we did, it would be of limited benefit unless we also understood the context. We must understand when they were used, why and with what degree of success. Tactical situations tend to follow patterns and on a small scale they can often be dealt with by tried and true methods that might spell disaster on a strategic level. Every time we learn a TTP to the point where we truly understand it and its proper employment, we've added another tool to our "tactical toolbox". Like any tool box, the more tools you have, the more likely it is that you will have the right tool for the job. A wrench can be a hammer in a pinch, but its better if you've got the real thing when something needs to be pounded. In the

same way studying historical accounts of battles at the small unit tactical level brings a benefit entirely separate from that which can be derived from studying the “big picture”.

Conclusion

History has led many astray over the centuries. The Maginot Line is just one of many examples. One wonders if the French considered the Great Wall of China when they were planning it. The problem was not history; the problem was how it was used. Failure to understand the inaccuracies of historical sources and the bias of most accounts of historical events can make it impossible to form an accurate picture of events. Insistence on clutching at easy answers and pre-fabricated solutions has led and will continue to lead to disaster. Careful evaluation of material and researching diverse sources will allow us to accurately understand and assess the problems and issues we continue to face. Using this understanding as our start point allows us to draw the conclusions that will give us the best chance of success in the future.

References

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