

## “Why Military Leaders Must Study Military History”

An argumentative essay by

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Colin Powell once said that “There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, learning from failure.” This statement raises a valid point that: studying military history, our blunders, as well as our successes, is what makes us successful as an organization. Our military history is a mix of success stories and dramatic failures, all of which add to our wealth of knowledge. Many of our military operations, which could be perceived as blunders, proved invaluable to us in future operations. The worst mistakes, if nothing else, should be used as teaching points for the future, in this way we are not doomed to remake these same mistakes.

In the Vietnam War for example, the United States entered the war to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam as part of a wider strategy called containment. The Vietnam War which took place in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1959 until April 30, 1975, exacted a huge human cost in terms of fatalities, including 3 to 4 million Vietnamese from both sides, 1.5 to 2 million Laotians and Cambodians, and 58,159 U.S. Soldiers. The overarching goal of the Vietnam War was part of a wider strategy called containment which was a policy created in response to a series of moves by the Soviet Union to expand communist influence in Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

The Vietnamese War has been viewed by some as a major loss of the United States Armed Forces, however, our knowledge of warfare in the post Vietnam era has grown substantially, as a military force we learned some of our hardest lessons, and have made

improvements in both our tactics and our military equipment since the end of the Vietnam War.

If we had chosen to ignore the history of the Vietnam War, and the events leading up to its outbreak, there would have appeared a large gap in our technical and tactical understanding of warfare and human relations. Studying history can yield many lessons that are important to how we operate as an organization, as well as small units. One of the most important lessons learned from the Vietnam War for example was how we could better conduct clandestine operations.

While our regular infantry units were not very successful in the Vietnam War, our Special Forces and Ranger units learned very well how to successfully carry out operations and the best ways of defeating our enemy. This goes to show that the study of history is important not only for learning from our mistakes, but how our organization adapted to an enemy that seemed to be unbeatable in the conventional term, and became very successful at carrying out operations against them.

Students of history also acquire, by studying different phases of the past and different societies in the past, a broad perspective that gives them the range and flexibility required to be successful in the military. Because our military is made of Soldiers from all different places in the world and many different races, it should be important for a Soldier to have an understanding of history to include foreign relations knowledge. To be successful in combat we must be a well knit unit, able to overcome any difference between the Soldiers of our units. If our leaders are ignorant of human relations they may cause problems while working with Soldiers from different nationalities, this is expected of Soldiers, but military leaders should be able to diffuse a difficult situation and understand how to bring a group of Soldiers together with different beliefs and ethnical origins and make them a tight knit unit that is able to overcome all diversity and operate together successfully to accomplish any mission.

When our nation's armed forces are deployed it is extremely important for them to understand the culture in which they are operating. Understanding the different people that live in an area, the language used in that area, and the history of the people of that area can be the key to our missions being carried out successfully. Also, it is important for our Soldiers and leaders to understand the military capabilities of their specific area of operations and the history of warfare in that region. This is not as simple as it sounds. If, for example, we take 2 separate towns that the military is conducting current operations in and study the behavior of the residents of both towns, we may be surprised at the difference. In the first town we may encounter a friendly neighborhood where women and children are free to roam the streets and the men create an environment that is generally safe, the residents may wave hello to us, offer us food and water, and treat us as friendly as they would treat any other strangers to their town. However, if we move not any more than 5 miles away we may find ourselves in another town where violence prevails and the locals are hostile towards our troops. A good example of this occurs in 2 areas in which my unit, A Co, 225 BSB conducted current operations. While conducting Deliberate Combat Logistics Patrols (DCLP's) in a small town called Sab Al Bour in the 2-14 Cavalry area of operations our convoy lost a load of cargo off the back of one of our trucks, the residents quickly rushed to our aid and helped our Soldiers to reload and tie down the materials. Two days later while operating in the town of Tarmiyah, which was patrolled by 1-14 Infantry and lay 10 miles to the north-west of Sab Al Bour, our convoy blew a tire and had to slow convoy speed, immediately the residents began to throw rocks and other debris at our convoy vehicles and personnel. Therefore, it is not only important to understand the history of a region as a whole, but also to study the different religious groups that live in the towns of that area and how they interact with each other and others that are simply moving through their town. By devoting

ourselves to the study of history to improve our techniques in warfare is extremely valuable to the future success of our armed forces. Wherever we are deployed in the world, whether to conquer or aid, we must be able to discern the different peoples that we are working with, and what type of actions would be best to help us achieve mission accomplishment.

Another important reason to study history is to carry on the banner of our past generations. Our Army has a proud history stretching over some 200 years which has encompassed multiple wars, thousands of battles, and many different types of leadership. One of the main responsibilities of our modern day Soldiers is to carry on the tradition of our armed forces with a level of excellence that continues to grow. Our Army has a great many programs that were created to continue on the legacy of our military heritage with honor. The Old Guard for example is comprised of the 3rd US Infantry Regiment BCT and conducts ceremonies in order to maintain the traditions of the US Army, showcase the Army to our nation's citizens and the world. Each Soldier that comes to a new unit is often expected to learn the unit's history, and may have to recite a portion of it during a military ball or class. Many civilian institutions also offer military history classes to help the public understand our proud history, and the importance of the military in the protection of our nation and of our allies. Studying military history for the sake of carrying on the traditions of the Army serves multiple purposes; it first serves to continue to show the people of our country that we are a proud organization that will continue to serve America with honor and commitment, it teaches Soldiers about the importance of being a professional organization, and it builds in Soldiers a sense of purpose that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

Soldiers want to be proud of their accomplishments. And we like to show pride for our history. Soldiers who study history and are aware of the impact that they can make on other

Soldiers, our Country, and the world often make better leaders because they are able to inspire those around them to better themselves and their comrades.

Much of what we have discussed deals with the history of the Army as a whole, although this is a very important aspect of our military lives, it is also essential to look at history with a different perspective. A new Commander, First Sergeant, or Sergeant Major that is preparing to take over an organization should also familiarize himself/herself with the history of not only the organization, but also the Soldiers and leaders that are working in that organization. One of the most powerful tools that a leader can possess is the power to understand the leaders that are placed over him/her, as well as the leaders and Soldiers that he/she oversees. It is very important to know things such as what type of college degrees, if any, the leaders working for you have in order to give them work that is best suited to them, and will improve the unit the most by their accomplishments of those tasks. It is also important to understand the underlying Soldier issues that can distract an organization and its leaders from the mission it must accomplish. If, for example, a leader enters an organization that has a problem with disrespect, then the leader must first focus his/her efforts on ensuring that the Soldiers in his/her unit are able to work within the confines of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the rules that he/she specifically makes for the organization.

My experience as a First Sergeant in Iraq was in leading the Soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25<sup>th</sup> ID, 225 BSB Distribution Company. The Soldiers of Alpha Company, 225 Brigade Support Battalion were the most amazing synergized group of individuals that I have ever witnessed in my 22 years of military service! The sacrifice, selfless service and focused professional dedication of our Soldiers was simply spectacular. Despite inheriting a mission that had been conducted by a unit that was manned with nearly twice as

many Soldiers and equipment that was faltering at best, the Comanche Soldiers picked up and ran with their mission performing at levels that senior leaders throughout Iraq remarked as the best they had ever seen.

Alpha Company, 225 Brigade Support Battalion conducted support to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) for combat operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom 07-09. Alpha Company conducted distribution of all classes of supply and services to 16 different fixed joint security stations (JSS) and combat outposts (COP) over a 1300 square mile battle-space. Additionally, the Distribution Company operated and managed the SBCT's Ammunition Transfer and Holding Point in support of the more than 4,000 Soldiers and weapon systems. Lastly, Alpha Company conducted Heavy Equipment Transport (HET) operations in support of emergency vehicle recovery missions and heavy engineer equipment transportation.

Alpha Company's accomplishments during OIF 07-09 included: successfully completed 328 Deliberate Combat Logistic Patrols, conducted more than 40 Recovery missions, 80 HET missions in support of Engineer Equipment and barrier movements, 800 base support missions, distribution of more than 1.9 million gallons of bulk water and 2.1 million gallons of Class III (B), and 11 ground transportation missions of a total of 43 detainees. The ATHP also resourced and coordinated a first-class force protection upgrade of the 2D SBCT's Ammunition Transfer Holding Point and oversaw the reduction of more than 165,000 pounds of Net Explosive Weight (NEW) to bring the 2D SBCT's inherited Class V supplies into US Army tolerance.

The Soldiers of the Distribution Company transcended success on the battlefield. This group of professionals dedicated themselves to a pronounced developmental program that encouraged both personal and professional growth as Soldiers and citizens. Programs included 31 Soldiers enrolling in online college courses, 15 Soldiers improving their GT score, four

Soldiers accepted as Army Recruiters, 117 Soldiers completing a Financial Readiness Class, over 100 Soldiers completing a comprehensive fitness and nutrition seminar, and 78 Soldiers enrolling in Military Correspondence Courses. During CPT Williams' command, he influenced 32 Soldiers to re-enlist in just three months of FY 2008 resulting in achieving 138% of his mission.

The Soldiers of Alpha Company constantly 'improved the foxhole'. During the 15-month deployment, the Comanches completed many projects to include: refurbishing the entire Command Post (CP), re-designing the Platoon Building, fencing in a new motor pool, constructing a 1500 square foot MWR area (the 'Tee-Pee') with a first-class deck and BBQ area, upgraded force protection for the CP, upgrading the gravel and mud-protection over a 12,000 square foot footprint, and building a deck in front of the Company area. The Comanche Soldiers took pride in maintaining the largest footprint in the Battalion.

Some of the most precious highlights of the deployment were the morale and welfare events that were planned, resourced, and executed by the junior Soldiers of the Company. Pool parties, volleyball and basketball tournaments, weekly BBQs, and video-teleconferences were the norm. However, the Comanche Soldiers shined in the final months of the deployment during their showcase MWR events that included a fully equipped Casino-style 'Comanche Game Night' that issued out of over \$3000 in prizes to the Comanche Soldiers, a Haunted House for Halloween that hosted hundreds of Soldiers and civilians from around Camp Taji, and a family-oriented Thanksgiving and Christmas event.

None of what we had accomplished would have been possible if we had not taken the time to study the Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures of the unit that we had replaced. The missions that they were unsuccessful with became the focus of our leaders, so that we could

learn from their mistakes and not be doomed to repeat them. Also closely studying the area in which we were operating out of was extremely important to the success of our unit, and the fact that we were able to bring our entire unit home without any injury caused by enemy forces. Because the Soldiers of our company possessed a vast knowledge of the state of current operations and took the time to learn everything they could from the history of the unit that we replaced, our unit was very successful at conducting our mission in Iraq. Our next and final task, in Iraq was to pass on our history to the unit that replaced us. If we do not take the time to conduct After Action Reviews (AAR's) and pass on the knowledge that we possess, we will only continue to make the same mistakes that have been made in the history of our military. The worst mistakes, if nothing else, should be used as teaching points for the future, in this way we are not doomed to remake these same mistakes.

#### References:

Personnel wartime experience serving as 1SG for A CO, 225 BSB, 2<sup>nd</sup> SBCT, 25 ID OIF 07-09

Academy course history diskettes

Old Guard Webpage:

<http://www.army.mil/info/organization/unitsandcommands/commandstructure/theoldguard/>