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America's Disastrous First Battles

MSG Mark D. Demers

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class #35

SGM Faithette Foreman

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### Abstract

On several occasions throughout history the US military has been ill-equipped to attain victory at the commencement of operations. While there are many examples of battles lost, this paper will focus primarily on the Battle of Queenston Heights during the War of 1812, and the Battle of Kasserine during World War II. Doctrine, policy, politics, command and control, and lack of preparedness contributed to these disastrous first battles. These root factors affected readiness and hindered the military's ability to perform successfully during the initial stages of conflict. Today's Noncommissioned Officer must study and be cognizant of these past failures in order to achieve success in today's fast paced operational environment.

## America's Disastrous First Battles

Of America's first ten battles, the US Army suffered five defeats (Long Island, Queenston, Bull Run, Kasserine, and Osan/Naktong) (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 329). In this paper we will discuss the defeats at Queenston and Kasserine and how doctrine, policy, politics, command and control, and lack of preparedness contributed to these losses.

Doctrine is supposed to be a clear, concise, set of guiding principles used for war preparation (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 332). For years, Americans had followed Prussian-like drill laid down by Baron von Steuben during the American Revolution and modified only enough to accommodate the organizational differences amongst the state militia (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 36). Although this type of doctrine may have been successful in the past, it was no longer relevant. Doctrinal proposals prior to the War of 1812 centered on French linear tactics and formations and did not incorporate the light infantry tactics employed during the Revolutionary War. In the case of the Battle of Queenston, the Army did not learn from and build on past successes. Instead, it used outdated doctrine and was defeated by a significantly smaller force.

At the Battle of Kasserine, the US Army employed a new doctrinal concept: the tank destroyer. Unfortunately, neither the equipment nor training for tank destroyer operations was adequate (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 334). The new doctrine was regarded as a failure after German armor annihilated the tank destroyer in its first engagement. The Army subsequently reconsidered the entire concept making tanks the primary anti-tank weapon.

In addition to doctrinal problems, policy and politics contributed greatly to the failures at Queenston and Kasserine. Prior to the War of 1812, politicians insisted on maintaining the smallest possible regular Army and relied on citizen Soldiers to provide the bulk of the force in

time of war (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 56). This policy would prove faulty as most of the militia didn't live where the war was going to be fought.

Prior to Queenston, new laws were enacted to create a vastly different military force structure which inevitably caused confusion and recruiting problems (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 39). To make matters worse, there was no stability in policy preceding the War of 1812; as a result political debate ensued. The main players in this debate were Alexander Smyth and William Duane, neither of which had any combat experience at the time.

Smyth, who was the Inspector General, adapted his manuscript from existing French regulations. His regulation was later sanctioned by the Secretary of War and published in 1812. Duane, who was the Adjutant General, discredited Smyth's manuscript as a "very injurious mutilation of the French infantry system in which essential parts had been totally cut out" (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 40). Smyth's regulation was subsequently withdrawn for revision and Duane's "*Book for Infantry*" was submitted to congress for approval. Duane claimed that his regulation would "explain in a familiar and practical manner the modern improvements in the discipline and movement of armies" (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 40).

Unfortunately for the Army, congress did not act on the resolution prior to the start of the War of 1812 and the Army was left to prepare for war with no approved discipline system or updated tactical doctrine (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 40). Without a discipline system and updated tactical doctrine command and control problems ensued. In addition, it was common policy in this period for officers to be appointed to command positions due to political affiliation or status without regard to military experience or leadership ability.

Although not as extreme, politics and policy played a part in the decisions made at Kasserine as well. In 1942, President Roosevelt told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that by the end of the year, American troops must be fighting the German Army. Exactly where the battle took place and with what objective were secondary (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 337). This political pressure to rush into battle contributed to the disastrous outcome at Kasserine.

Since doctrine, policy, politics shape and govern the armed forces it is not a surprise that command and control problems arose as a result of these failures. Having no approved uniformed discipline system during the War of 1812 was problematic for the Army and militia. Discipline and command and control are crucial to a decisive victory. In the Battle of Queenston discipline and command and control were lacking. The initial plan was to have a simultaneous two pronged attack at Fort George and Queenston with the attacking force composed of Army and militia. When it came time to execute the assault, the main American force attacked at Queenston as planned but the commander of the force near Fort George did not. Since the commander of the force near Fort George, didn't care for the plan or the notion of serving under a militia officer, he refused to cooperate (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 44). In addition, the forces from the New York militia that were expected to support the main assault refused to cross the river and support them. They claimed that, as militia, they were not obligated to fight on foreign soil (Gray, 2009). Even though the American force was six times larger, command and control collapse by the American force contributed greatly to their demise at Queenston.

Arrogance and poor commanders plagued operations at Kasserine. Reactions were slow and cautious, units were dispersed instead of concentrated, air-ground coordination was defective and replacement troops lacked physical fitness and training. Higher commanders lacked the skill

to mass defensive fire and coordinate units in battle which resulted in the lack of air support, fratricide, and blurred allied battle space (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 262).

Without a disciplined force and supporting doctrine, the military had problems with preparedness which ultimately stemmed from lack of quality training and equipment. Only one camp for instruction was opened to service the northern frontier. This camp operated for four months in Philadelphia until it was abandoned when the demand for troops required that all be sent directly to the front (Heller & Stofft, 1986, p. 40). Without the proper training, the troops were nothing more than a semi-organized gaggle and were more of a hazard than a help. In addition to lack of training, the Army did not have adequate supplies to get the job done. This was due to the Army's quartermaster departments being re-established at the dawn of war. With the increase in recruiting, the demand for weapons, equipment, supplies and services suddenly surged and overwhelmed the fledgling system.

The defeat at Kasserine provided the US Army with a harsh warning about its preparation deficiencies (Parker, 1995, p 323). At Kasserine, Rommel stated that "the Americans had as yet no practical battle experience, and it was now up to us to instill in them from the outset an inferiority complex of no mean order" (Liddell-Hart, 1953, p 398). The cause of such a defeat can be attributed to improper training focus in the five months prior to arrival in North Africa. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division stressed small unit training and gunnery which improved tank-artillery cooperation but did nothing for tank-infantry and air-ground cooperation. They also lacked the ability to identify enemy weapons and equipment. Also, the Americans were overconfident prior to Kasserine and mistook their brief performance against the French in Morocco as more than adequate for success against the Germans and Italians (Liddell-Hart, 1953, p 243).

### Role of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO)

NCOs at this time were locked into one regiment for the duration of their career. The role of the NCO during the Battle of Queenston was not that unlike the NCO of today. NCOs were responsible for the care, discipline and training of the men. On the battlefield NCOs were employed as file or “gap” closers in close order or linear formations. They were also charged with “aimed volley fire” or unit marksmanship (Center, 2007, p 24-25). This arduous duty was performed from behind the battle line under direct fire which required skill and willpower (Center, 1989, p 2). The role of the NCO changed during the time of Battle of Kasserine. In addition to the traditional responsibilities of caring for and training Soldiers, NCOs were now small unit leaders and were an essential element to their unit’s success or failure.

Lack of NCO empowerment and education prior to these battles contributed to their failure. In volunteer units of this period (1812), officers were largely elected officials who caused numerous problems with discipline. Although NCOs were charged with the care, discipline and training of the men, they were not considered unit leaders. In addition, NCOs of this period were not professionally educated. Training beyond on-the-job instruction by company commanders was non-existent. During World War II the role of the NCO changed due to enormity of the mobilized force. For the first time NCOs were now considered small unit leaders but, they were still not afforded the educational opportunities enjoyed by officers during that timeframe.

During both these time periods (Queenston and Kasserine), NCOs were asked to do their duties with no formal NCO education or training. If professionally trained NCOs led at Queenston and Kasserine. Mentorship and discipline would be commonplace along with

proficiency in individual and unit drills. With NCO training, mentorship, and opportunity, confidence and excellence would have certainly followed.

### Counter Argument

The success of the Battle of Cantigny proves the US military has never been completely unprepared to fight and win its first battles. Preparation, proper doctrine, and experienced commanders have a positive effect on the outcome of a battle. Prior to the Battle of Cantigny, commanders made tactical and doctrinal adjustments based on lessons learned from Allied and German forces which positively impacted the outcome of the battle (Liddell-Hart, 1953, p 185). This proves that given adequate training time, American forces could perform well in battle.

### Conclusion

The catastrophe's at Queenston and Kasserine prove that lack of preparation, outdated doctrine, political intervention, and command and control issues plagued our military during the initial stages of battle. As far as early battles are concerned, the success at Cantigny proves to be more of an exception than the rule. Though many of our first battles may have been disastrous, we continue to learn from our mistakes. The lessons learned from our past successes and failures have assisted today's military to evolve into one of the world's premier super powers.



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