

Running Head: THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY TO THE MILITARY PROFESSIONAL

The Importance of History to the Military Professional

CSM Brian A. Hamm

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Greg Taylor

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### Abstract

History is important to the development of professional soldiers and should continue to be utilized during times of training, and be integrated in all military schools. History provides lessons in tactics and strategy, which can be applied to current situations, illustrate points of doctrine, and instill values of military heritage. By studying the evolution of warfare, past mistakes can be integrated into training to improve upon current performance. Military history is a key element in the education of a soldier which can instill the ability to perceive historical parallels during battle and capitalize on the lessons learned from the past.

### The Importance of History to the Military Professional

Teaching history is beneficial to the development of professional soldiers through lessons learned during war and peace time. Through the study of history, soldiers can gain an idea of the experiences of the art of warfare without being engaged in combat. History provides a window into battles and wars spanning deep into the past. These experiences contain valuable lessons of combat practices used during times of conflict. They tell how great nations were created and how they crumbled in defeat. One can draw a mental picture that will carry over to real life situations, by sharing these war experiences and strategies of war. These accounts provide the soldier with examples of leadership, inspiration, courage, and serve as a warning against negligence or unnecessary vigilance. Military students who study history can gain the foundation of war through lessons of past experiences, innovation, tactics, operations and strategies.

Military history is essential to the development of professional soldiers and should continue to be utilized during times of training, as well as continue to be integrated in all military schools. The history of warfare can teach the background behind tactics and create an understanding of how they were developed. Tactics are based on doctrine and reinforced by repetition during training exercises, which are then proven in combat. (Millett & Maslowski, 1984) Knowing the doctrine and rehearsing tactics are essential elements of learning the proper skills needed during times of war. Understanding how tactics are developed and through studying past experiences, one can learn how to think on a more tactical level. During a battle, the enemy's objective is killing, and they come to the battlefield with a diverse set of weaponry, tactics, techniques, and cultural motivation. Training can only be used as a substitute for actual

combat experience. Through studying history, a leader can learn the advantages and disadvantages of how soldiers prevailed or failed tactically against an enemy.

One must be historically competent and not separate past experiences from present experiences to successfully prevail during times of battle. General George S. Patton, one of American's greatest tactical warriors, was a devoted reader of history and meticulously studied tactics, as well as learned everything possible about potential adversaries. In 1909, while still a cadet at the Military Academy, Patton wrote in his personal journal, "In order for a man to become a great soldier, it is necessary for him to be so thoroughly conversant with all sorts of military possibilities that whenever an occasion arises, he has at hand, without effort, on his part, a parallel." (Blumenson, 1996) He believed that reading history would allow one's mind to permeate its elements and create the ability to grasp the most perplexing questions of the warfare. Patton's own words were put to the test in 1944 at Normandy. With bad weather threatening to postpone operations, Patton sought guidance through studying Rommel's book, *Infantry Attacks*, which described the heavy downpour of rain in September 1914 and the German's ability to overcome and continue with their plan of attack. (Blumenson, 1996) This recollection of success inspired Patton to stick to the order of attack. Military history, as displayed by General Patton, is essential to the development of professional soldiers and should continue to be utilized during training exercises and integrated into all military schools.

Military history provides lessons of applied strategies in which the actual outcomes can be evaluated. Alfred Thayer Mahan, America's most notorious naval theorist described Germany's strategy and defeat in World War I against Russia as being similar to a building with an imperfect foundation – "if the strategy be wrong, the skill of the general on the battlefield, the valor of the soldier, the brilliancy of victory, however otherwise decisive, fail of their effect."

(Vogal, 1947) The skill of the commander, knowledge of strategy, and tactics require personal courage in the face of danger. Drastic changes in technological advances have helped soldiers adapt to the war environment as well as the physical environment differently than in the past. As stated by General MacArthur, the military student “extends his analytic interest to the dust-buried accounts of wars long past as well as those still reeking with the scent of battle” to “bring to light those fundamental principles and their combinations and applications which, in the past have been productive of success.” (Perret, 1978) Military leaders can gain war experience without fighting due to studying military history and participating in simulated war gaming techniques and live fire exercises.

Studying military history allows professional soldiers to learn the fighting and past warfare styles of many different countries and how soldiers succeeded or failed using those techniques. Sir Julian Corbett noted, “The value of history in the art of war is not only to elucidate the resemblance of past and present, but also their essential differences.” (Corum, 1992) The development of the German blitzkrieg (a mobile form of warfare that combined close air support and tanks with mechanized infantry) represents Corbett’s insight because it was used to shift the advantage back to the offensive between World War I and World War II. History teaches us the importance of lessons learned in regards to successes and failures during times of conflict. One can draw from the examples of previous conflicts and learn ways to improve and overcome new offensives. Through advances in technology, “multiple means are necessary to address a spectrum of conflict that continues to expand with each evolution and revolution in warfare.” (Millett & Maslowski, 1984) History serves as an informational guide about past tactics and strategies in times of war, and how these failed, succeeded or why they are still utilized today.

The study of military history can also teach professional soldiers decision making skills. These learned skills can be beneficial both on and off the battlefield by gaining knowledge about past military leaders and their critical decisions. Although an immense amount of time is dedicated to training and preparing for war, no one knows how they will react to the stresses of combat until they are on the battlefield. In a letter dated March, 25, 1943, General George S. Patton, Jr. described his own internal conflict to his wife, Beatrice: "I still get scared under fire. I guess I will never get used to it, but I still poke along." (Blumenson, 1985) Soldiers who have never been to war can take comfort in knowing these uncertainties are normal. Overcoming one's personal fears in combat can be easier if leaders know that some of the most renowned historical war heroes shared the same type of mental anguish due to their decisions. General Patton stated that "All men are frightened. The more intelligent they are, the more they are frightened. The courageous man is the man who forces himself, in spite of his fear, to carry on." (Blumenson, 1985) The ability to inspire and move soldiers, weigh the risks, and maintaining a clear head in the midst of chaos are essential components to successful leadership. These historical acknowledgements from great leaders show the power of inspiration from lessons learned and can mean the difference between victory and defeat in the midst of a battle.

Military history presents the risks of war, how they are overcome or adapted in real world conflicts, and allows us to incorporate these lessons into training exercises to prepare today's soldiers for the battlefield. When making a critical decision on the battlefield, one must always consider the risks and benefits of the decision, which has the heavier weight, and how they should be carried out. According to Henry Kissinger, "History is not, of course, a cookbook offering pretested recipes. It teaches by analogy, not by maxims. It can illuminate the consequences of actions in comparable situations, yet each generation must discover for itself

what situations are in fact comparable.” (Kissinger, 1979) For example, take the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima near the end of WWII, which began the nuclear age of weaponry. The assumption was that nuclear warfare would make all other types of general warfare obsolete, but just the opposite was discovered after the bombings. They proved effective with pure destruction, but the disadvantages were much higher than the tactical advantage. Public safety was put too far at risk, even decades after the bombings, and atomic weapons were considered too dangerous for effective warfare. Therefore, had the risks and benefits of atomic warfare been weighed before the bombings, the decision to bomb the two cities would not have been approved.

Because of the time it requires to learn, some would say that the study of military history would not be a beneficial activity. However, as stated earlier, to be effective on the battlefield, one must be historically competent, regardless of the time required to learn it. To send soldiers out into the battlefield uneducated on past warfare, tactics, and strategy would be disastrous. Without taking the time to learn about mistakes made in the past, the outcome would surely devastate the numbers of our forces, and possibly result in more deaths by accident than enemy fire. Forgetting or failing to learn military history and believing it is not important would be seen as a failure for the present and the future. Napoleon stated, one “should read and meditate often about history; the only true philosophy. And [he] should read and think about the great captains. This is the only way to learn about war.” (Schom, 1992) By reading about military history, our soldiers of today will be better able to perceive the parallels of situations and formulate their decisions based on those parallels. If we did not have history, we would not become better and adapt to the things that have been accomplished in the past. Military history is fundamental in the development of exceptional soldiers and leaders, therefore; it should be

integrated into all curriculum of military schooling. It can help soldiers to better understand the development of tactics and apply strategies to different situations. Learning the advances in technology teach the soldier how different countries have adapted over the years with weaponry and strategy. Also, learning the fighting and warfare styles of other countries can assist in further developing the strategies used by the U.S. military. All of this helps soldiers become historically competent so the same mistakes that were made in the past will not be made again in the future.



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