

“Ten Minute Read”

Is it Useful for Military Officers to Study Military History?

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German historian Hans Delbruck, often regarded as the first modern military historian, believed the danger with military professionals studying military history was the fear that they transfer ‘phenomena from contemporary practice to the past without taking adequate account of the differences in circumstances’ (quoted in Howard, 1981, p.11). Indeed, Professor Michael Howard¹ (1981) contends that the social and technological changes witnessed during the interwar period were so considerable that an unintelligent study of military history, which does not take account of these changes, is more dangerous than no study of history at all.

The perception that military history was somewhat less useful following World War II was acted upon by the United States (US) Army schools, who moved away from the study of military history. This shift in direction was based on the belief that advances in technology had rendered the study of military history irrelevant to future military operations (Jessup, 2004). It could be reasonably argued that this was a step too far and in 1970 Brigadier General Hal C. Pattison, the then Chief of Military History for the US Armed Forces, wrote to the Army Chief of Staff (COS) informing him of his belief that the decision by the US Army’s higher schools to move away from the study of military history in the 1950s had negatively impacted officers in the 1960s, who he believed had not been thought the lessons of the past. Pattison urged the COS to restore the study of past operations to the curricula of Army schools. In response, a board established by the COS determined that there was indeed a need for the study of military history in the army with a view to ensuring ‘broadened perspective, sharpened judgement, increased perspectivity, and professional expertise’ amongst its ranks (Jessup, 2004, p. ix). Furthermore, the board recommended that the army publish a guide on the study and use of military history that, it was envisaged, would act as a useful tool for self-education throughout an officer’s career (Jessup, 2004).

This paper will argue that the study of military history is indeed useful to officers and will provide examples in support of this argument. It will highlight how the study of military history can assist with an officer’s professional and intellectual development, creating critical

¹ Chichele Professor of History of War and Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University (1977-1989), Professor Military and Naval History, Yale University (1989-1993).



and creative thinkers. Once taught, the study of military history should be self-directed and continuous over the course of an officer's career. This paper will also highlight the pitfalls associated with military history and why there is a need to approach its study with caution.

The utility of military history to military leaders

The British military historian and strategist, Sir Basil Liddell Hart believed that the military profession was restricted in learning because 'direct experience is inherently too limited to form an adequate foundation either for theory or application' (1971, quoted in McLeod, 2022). To counter a soldier's lack of war experience, Howard (1981) believed that they are compelled to study military history, given his belief that wars resemble each other more than any other human activity. He believed military officers could gain a real glimpse into the experience of war by studying a single military campaign in depth, not just the official history but associated memoirs, letters, and diaries. Howard contended that by studying the evolution of warfare one could determine what, in warfare, had remained the same and more importantly what had not. A similar view is shared by Ian Speller who asserts that military history can help develop an individual's understanding of war by 'alerting them to the issues that have been important in the past and that may reasonably be expected to be important again' (Speller, 2012, p.7). It is for reasons such as this that the study of military history may be so instrumental to the development of military leaders. Torrence posits that 'leadership literature based on military history and experience is very important in a soldier's development' (Torrence, 2018, p.2). A modern-day example of a military leader worth exploring in terms of his reliance on military history is retired General Jim Mattis, former head of US Central Command and a former US Secretary of Defence.

Mattis in his book 'Call Sign Chaos' refers to his continuous study of military history and how it helped guide him through his career. He argues, 'if you haven't read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent because your personal experiences alone aren't broad enough to sustain you' (Mattis, 2019, p. 42). Mattis studied military history to inform areas of his profession in which he felt weak, believing it to be unethical and careless not to take advantage of the writings on centuries of conflict. Mattis writes, 'during planning and before going into battle, I could cite specific examples of how others had solved similar challenges. By travelling into the past, I enhance my grasp of the present' (Mattis, 2019, p.42). This approach is also reflected in the US Military History Operations Doctrine (2003), which refers to commanders judging the effectiveness of current or planned operations by comparing them to a historical operation against a similar enemy or across similar terrain. General George S. Patton² contended that to be a great soldier one must be familiar with all sorts of military possibilities, so when an issue arises and without effort one can draw on a parallel. To achieve this level of knowledge Patton outlined a methodology that a military leader should adopt in terms of their approach to the study of military history;

I think that it is necessary for a man to begin to read military history in its earliest and hence crudest form to follow it down in natural sequence, permitting his mind to grow with his subject until he can grasp without effort the most abstruse question of the science of war because he is already permeated with all its elements (quoted in Byerly, 2016).

² Commanded the 3rd US Army in France and Germany and the 7th US Army in the Mediterranean during World War II.

Patton was known for his study of military history, he took extensive notes on the successes and failures of Frederick the Great, Napoleon and Ardant du Picq. Author Roger Nye argues that the source of Patton's genius was in his library and his ability to learn on-the-job (cited in Byerly, 2016). Major Joe Byerly (2016) believes that Patton's experiences and education helped him develop mental models, which are pre-recorded bits of information stored on the brain that influence your decision making. According to Byerly, these mental models led Patton to many victories over the Germans in World War II. Indeed, in an essay titled 'The relevance of History to the Military Profession: An American Marine's view,' retired Marine Corps Lt. Gen Paul Van Riper recounted the books he read throughout his military career and how they shaped his mental models. Van Riper believes that studying the past enables 'practitioners of war to see familiar patterns of activity and to develop more quickly potential solutions to tactical and operational problems' (quoted in Byerly, 2016). Interestingly, in 2002, during a joint forces exercise simulation aimed at validating the new way in which the US Armed Forces conduct military operations, Van Riper, as the opposing force commander, outfought the US military with a technologically inferior force. Byerly believes that military leaders do not need to wait for military institutes to develop their mental models for war but rather follow the self-development example of Patton and Van Riper. However, the study of military history does not come without its caveats as highlighted by authors such as Howard.

Adopting a cautious approach to the study of military history

Howard (1981) wrote of the need to approach the study of history with a degree of scepticism and awareness that one is not reading what happened in the past but rather 'what historians say happened in the past', noting that evidence of past military operations can be contradictory and confusing. At times historians have had ulterior motives when documenting past events, creating an image, through careful interpretation, that may be targeting support for a political regime or encouraging patriotic or religious feeling; a phenomenon that Howard refers to as 'myth making'. For example, Frank Hoffman (2014), a senior research fellow at the National Defense University in Washington DC believes the ability of the US to learn from its recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq is hampered by a culture that is reluctant to critically examine its own experiences. Hoffman states that 'hard earned lessons from prior conflicts are often tucked away by our preference for more romantic regimental histories or stories of great valour' (Hoffman, 2014). Liddell Hart warns that such an approach to history makes learning from past experiences difficult and can even lead to false conclusions (1971, cited in Speller, 2012, p. 9). The likely inaccuracies brought about by such an approach mean that the study of military history must be approached with caution, in that it is incumbent on the reader to be aware of such short comings.

To use the study of military history to the same effect as Patton, Van Riper and Mattis, the reader must have the ability to determine what of history is applicable to a current or planned operation. Hoffman (2014) argues that one must take great care when searching for lessons from history, he contends that 'case histories can be enormously insightful, but only if one is ruthlessly objective and rigorous in the development of the underlying conditions, the granular context of each case' (Hoffman, 2014). Some are better at the process of learning from history than others, it requires critical inquiry and the ability to ask good questions. Howard (1981) believed there are three general rules to be followed when studying military history, to avoid its pitfalls. Firstly, it must be studied in width to observe the evolution of warfare over a long period, secondly it must be studied in depth to get a sense of the realities of war, and thirdly it must be studied in context because war cannot be fully understood if

one does not understand the nature of the society fighting them. Such a comprehensive approach to the study of history also aids in the intellectual development of officers, something highlighted by Speller (2012) who believes the study of history can promote an individual's ability to 'research, analyse, evaluate, and interpret evidence'. Colonel Christopher Kolenda also reinforces this idea and asserts that 'intellectual development is the key that opens the door to meaning' (quoted in Torrence, 2018, p. 4). Central to this notion of intellectual development is the requirement to foster an ability in military leaders to think both critically and creatively, which is an area this paper will now explore in more detail.

Critical and creative thinkers

The Irish Defence Forces (DF) Leadership Doctrine³ (2016) emphasises the need for the DF to develop creative thinkers and 'critical thinking educated leaders' who are 'knowledgeable in military history'. Critical and creative thinking are two modes of cognition that are worth briefly exploring in turn. In terms of critical thinking, Kem believes it 'involves determining the meaning and significance of what is observed or expressed' (Kem, 2020, p. 13). The ability to critically think enables leaders to understand a situation, identify problems, find a cause, and arrive at a conclusion. Critical thinking is required at all levels of military leadership and is a key component of both the Military Decision-Making Process and the Operations Planning Process. Both are used by the DF to plan military operations, critically analysing important factors, identifying problems, and including mitigation measures or solutions based on the planner's military knowledge and experience. The study of military history not only improves one's military knowledge but also their ability to critically think as highlighted by Bolton (2015) 'a broad historical background teaches officers the value of general education and critical thinking'.

In terms of creative thinking the DF Leadership Doctrine also refers to the need for innovative leaders who demonstrate creativity, developing new ideas and approaches to accomplish missions. Where a new problem arises or an old one requires a new solution, creative thinking is required. There are two approaches to creative thinking, the innovative approach which is developing a new idea or the adaptive approach which in military terms can be aided by the study of history.

The adaptive approach is where one draws on previous circumstances and experiences and applies those lessons to a current problem (Kem, 2020). An example of an adaptive approach in a military context is provided by Mattis (2019) who compared the US Marine's strategy to invade Afghanistan to that of Union General William T. Sherman's Atlanta campaign during the American civil war. Sherman's tactics were to threaten to invade two objectives before launching his attack. This forced the Confederate army to split their forces, giving Sherman a decisive advantage. Sherman referred to this as putting the enemy on the 'horns of a dilemma', Mattis adapted this approach and used it during the US invasion of Afghanistan. The US Marines seized an area known as Rhino, ninety miles outside of Afghanistan's second largest city Kandahar. This forced the Taliban to decide whether to keep the bulk of their forces in the north of the country, where they were already fighting US soldiers, or move them to the south to defend Kandahar. Mattis also used Sherman's approach in Iraq, writing that

³ Also draws on the connection between the study of history and self-development. The doctrine refers to the need for leaders to practice lifelong learning, to read history and leadership theory and apply what they have learned.

he attempted to 'always keep the enemy on the horns of a dilemma, left or right, front or back'. He went on to say, 'I may not have come up with too many new ideas, but I've adopted or integrated a lot from others' (Mattis, 2019, p.84). This example from Mattis offers compelling evidence of the utility of military history to the military leader, in the contemporary operating environment. If one acknowledges then that there is utility in the study of military history, an important question to ask is how military leaders should approach this study.

How to approach the study of military history

Torrence (2018) cautioned that one of the factors preventing soldiers in the US army becoming creative leaders is a culture that does not provide opportunities for them to broaden their sources of professional reading. It may be partly for this reason that Patton, Van Riper and Mattis took it upon themselves to conduct a comprehensive study of military history over the entirety of their careers, for their own professional development (Byerly, 2016). Interestingly, Speller (2012) believes the key challenge facing military professionals applying Howard's three rules for the study of military history is the amount of time it takes to research a battle or campaign thoroughly, not to mention the time required to understand the social, political, economic, and cultural context. Speller puts it simply, 'the military do not do enough military history' (Speller, 2012, p.10). If we want the study of military history to be useful to military officers surely it needs to be a continuous process. Jay Luvaas⁴ argues that 'no course in military history can really do much good if the officer is exposed every half dozen years throughout his career to no more than a structured course of only a few months duration' (1995, quoted in Speller, 2012, p. 11).

What seems key to determining how useful military history can be to an officer is how they approach its study. Luvass contends that the objective at every level of a military education system should be to teach the student how to approach the study of history 'in the hope that he will make use of the subject afterwards on his own' (Luvass, 1985, p. 10). The purpose he believes should be to stimulate interest in the subject by selecting titles that are eminently readable and avoid statements like that from Napoleon who complained, 'I have studied much history, and often for a lack of a guide, I have been forced to waste considerable time in useless reading' (quoted in Luvass, 1985, p. 11). The next stage, Luvass believes, is to relate what they have read to their own professional interests and experiences. Indeed, Speller believes one of the objectives of military education should be to equip students with the skills 'to be intelligent consumers of military history and to recognise the value of such consumption' (Speller, 2012, p. 13). He believes this requires an integrated plan for education over the course of one's career which must include measures that encourage self-directed learning between career courses. Luvass's hope was that military history education programs would help develop a historical dimension to a soldier's thought process as an aid to good judgment. The idea that military education systems must teach students how to study military history is not a new one. For example, Napoleon once advocated for a special school that would instruct his officers on how to read history (Luvass, 1985). In this way, Napoleon was placing an emphasis on how we think about history; a lesson which is equally if not more important today.

Conclusion

⁴ Professor of Military History at the US Army War College (1927-2009).

The author believes that the study of military history is not only useful to military officers, but essential for them to understand the contemporary environment. In a profession where management decisions can put lives at risk, there is a responsibility on military leaders to learn from historical events. Whether this is to avoid making the same mistakes as the past or to familiarise oneself with historical tactical or operational problems, the benefits cannot be overstated, particularly given the stakes. This is not to argue that it is simply a matter of applying the lessons of the past to a contemporary problem, but rather, to aid the development of critical and creative thinkers, who armed with these lessons can develop informed solutions for current or future problems. The complexity of military operations requires such thinkers, it is therefore unsurprising that many of the worlds military education systems continue to teach military history.

However, as the paper suggests its study does not come without warning, particularly for military officers. Inaccuracies in the capturing of historical events can lead to false conclusions, which may be dangerous if not critically analysed and applied to a contemporary problem. Howard, undoubtedly an influential writer in terms of the authors argument, warns that military professionals must not repeat the mistakes of the past by applying theories deduced from past events, even though changes in conditions have rendered them obsolete. These shortcomings, however, once understood, can enhance the intellectual development of military officers as it requires one to critically analyse, evaluate and interpret the evidence. A common thread which seems key to answering the question set, is that the study of military history must be self-directed and continuous over the course of one's career. This approach will enhance an officer's professional knowledge, informing decisions and an informed decision is best.

Please note that the views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the Irish Defence Forces, the Infantry School or any other group or organisation.

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