

History, the Myth, and the Staff Ride: A New Look at the Development of Subordinate Leaders

*By Andrew M. Del Gaudio**

It must be stated that the highest virtue ascribed to a military professional is his character and the cultivation of character of the subordinates that he leads. Indeed, history is replete with examples of units that have adapted the ways and mannerisms of their leaders, right down to the most minor detail. We understand character as that inner strength that is guided by a sense of right and wrong while rooted in solid intellect. The physical manifestation of our character is displayed through our will to accomplish our assigned tasks. The most solemn duty of the senior is, in fact, to teach the subordinate. But what is he supposed to teach? In these days, the relevant answer is what they need to learn in order to survive in combat for the next seven or more months. It seems that time is the one thing that we never have enough of. Presently, in our time competitive environment, we are faced with the task, as leaders, to inculcate in our subordinates a character that will transcend the moral, the mental, and the physical aspects that compromise combat. The most appropriate answer is to examine how others have dealt with this same situation. Enter the study of history. We are going to explore the development of character and how we relate these lessons to our subordinates. The vehicle to explore these phenomena will be the past or what we commonly refer to as history. We will also explore the pitfalls of the study of history in relation to the military professional. Lastly, we will look at a technique for conducting the battlefield tour or “staff ride” for the development of subordinate unit leaders.

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1. Solid foundations

In order to have an effective unit, whether it is a combat arms unit or a support unit, it is imperative that everyone view these situations in a similar manner. Common values along with traditions are often asserted during entry level training to be maintained and developed throughout their career. At the centre of this development, we find character. What aspect of our character are we trying to develop? As stated, character is rooted in intellect and is governed by the will (Headquarters, Department of the Navy, United States Marine Corps, 1989:40). The development of intellect can not be overstated. Intellect must not only be developed in subordinates through the course of professional military studies, but also in areas less familiar and certainly less comfortable to the military professional. A German philosopher of the early twentieth century named Dr. Meumann once wrote, “Man can not namely and solely attempt to answer the question of whether the will is decided by intelligence, but rather indeed are the willing of intelligence” (Meumann, 1913:4). A sincere appreciation for philosophy and other art forms will create leaders with a broader horizon who will be more capable of dealing with the wide variety of problems that are associated with operating in the contemporary operating environment of today. We are always looking to develop in our subordinates the initiative to accomplish an assigned task. But more importantly, we must develop in our subordinates the decision-making skills and judgment which is necessary to take the initiative in to address the mission as they see fit. We must afford them this latitude. If we have developed our subordinates correctly, they are going to do what is right. This is not an insubordination to your orders. Rather, it is a result of truly understanding their commander’s intent in addition to what is happening around them. Developed judgment and decision-making skills foster the ability to critically analyze problems and develop detailed courses of action that will allow freedom of action to subordinates.

Developing a strong sense of character will allow for constructive criticism. More so then ever in this day and age, military professionals tend to get their egos bruised by the notion that there may be a more efficient or more correct technique for performing a task. The development of a “thick skin” is not just a nice to have, but a necessity for the military professional. If a unit is to become better, then it is necessary for them to be honest with themselves in recognizing their personal capabilities and limitations as well as that of the unit before somebody else does. While being a part of

that unit, your own opinion of your performance will always be subjective at best. The objective opinion of an individual not assigned to the unit will always provide the best form of evaluation on your performance. As many of us have heard in our personal or professional education, “you will likely see this again.”

2. The Role of History in the Development of Subordinates

In today’s American military organizations, combat experience abounds. Once upon a time, young officers were told that reading was a way to gain valuable “vicarious experience” about any aspect of combat from human factors (such as the moral, mental, and physical strains due to combat), to easy lessons about leadership in order to learn from the mistakes of others. With young leaders now having valuable first hand experience from the horrors of war, it would only make sense that teaching lessons that are relative to their professional military development would be made easier right? Wrong! There are age old problems that still persist.

The origin of these problems exists in the difference between what is the past and what is history. As correctly stated by Antulio J. Echevarria, “The past, simply put is what happened. History, in contrast, is the historian’s interpretation of what happened.” (2005:78). Leopold von Ranke, who was the father of modern historiography, viewed history as “what really happened” (Howard, 2003:19) Allow us to return to the notion of being subjective verses being objective, but let’s look at the problem through the lens of what Sir Michael Howard referred to as “myth making” (*Ibid.*, p. 18) First and foremost it is of the highest importance to remember that the side who typically writes the history of any engagement, whether battle or war, is the side that wins. “Myth making” rears its ugly head for a few prominent reasons. Here are but a few of those reasons:

2.1. Believe in the subculture

It is important for us as military professionals to never forget that our military services are a reflection of the society from which they came. Each military service has a unique subculture from the nation for which it serves. Every Military Occupational Specialty or (MOS) and every unit also have their own unique story to tell as well. The importance of the subculture to members of a unit is that it allows for its members to identify with each other under the common bond of members that have gone before them.

The lore of such tales is the thing that keeps the young soldiers from falling asleep at their post or officers from surrendering their positions. The healthy believes that the man on the right or on the left will sustain the subculture and provide the moral backbone in order to continue under tough times. This belief in the subculture is what propels healthy and sometimes unhealthy competition among the Armed Services. The danger of the subculture is when current members feel that new members must be initiated into the group in order to prove their worthiness and to pay their dues. Enter the fraternity style hazing that has been common in military organizations for generations. By acknowledging the root causes of the desire to belong to something bigger than an individual's identity, the military organizations will only then come up with solutions to their unique problem.

3. "The military way or militarism" (Vagts, 1959:13)

A method of sustaining the subculture and building or adding to the common "myth" is through memoirs. Whether they are written by the victorious or the defeated is relative to whether or not the object of study was won or lost. Successful as well as unsuccessful military officers write memoirs. What is their purpose? More often than not, it is to recount their version of what happened in a manner that they would like for you to believe. Perhaps it is a need to explain their experiences for the sake of posterity, or to preserve their name and reputation because they simply would prefer for us to remember their interpretation instead. The reasoning lies in the outcome of the event and is governed by the character of the man that wrote it. The self-account of any memoir is far from being an objective version of the story. The untrained eye must proceed with caution when reading memoirs. A student of the past must search far and wide to find an objective history of the event for which they are studying. Memoirs are only for use to explore the reasons that surround why certain decisions were made at particular times. As Alfred Vagts suggested in the title of this segment "the military way or militarism," from his all important work *A History of Militarism*, the author of the memoir is wishing to contribute good for the "military way," but may unwillingly contribute to militarism and the furtherance of the popular "myth." A tradition that existed during the time of the Prussian Kingdom prior to 1870 was that Prussians were forbidden from writing memoirs. As expressed by Alfred Vagts, "If confession is one test of truthfulness, then there is little of reality in the military memoirs. The Prussian General Constantin von

Alvensleben, an upright and conservative man, laid down the rule that “a Prussian general dies but does not leave any memoirs.” Prussian tradition long forbade the public appearance of the individual officer in his lifetime or posthumously” (Vagts, 1959:25).

With these two thoughts in mind, how can we train our subordinates using history as a vehicle to learn? The age old adage of “buyers beware” applies. The leader wishing to educate his subordinates using history must have a full grasp of the subject that he is teaching and recognize the pitfalls of the subject matter. Remembering that we are reflections of the society from which we come, Americans tend to want the “bottom line up front,” in order to match our fast paced lifestyle. In order for you to use military history properly, it is going to require you to do some homework on the topic that you are going to teach. Thorough preparation and an intelligent lesson plan for the topics that you want to teach your subordinates will enhance and leave an indelible memory of the exercise. If done properly this is an excellent opportunity to “train the trainer.” Getting subordinates excited to do this sort of work requires truly skilled leadership. You are not going to get the best results if you plan on doing your battle study at 1630 on a Friday afternoon, unless of course you are deployed and there is no leave or liberty in sight. Like everything in life, timing and location are everything.

4. The crawl, walk, and run of military history and making it useful

As with all good military operations, you must have a clearly defined objective to your training and you must have a culminating point where it can all come together for your subordinates. For the purpose of this example, the culminating point of our exercise will be to conduct a battle field tour or “staff ride.” Depending on where you are physically located in the world will ultimately determine how far you will have to go and what time period you will be studying. Generally, being along the East Coast of the United States or any country in Europe will allow for the study of a battle. A common misconception that exists among trainers is that it needs to be a large battle in the scope and size of Gettysburg, Waterloo, or Iwo Jima in order for a student to gain an understanding of the events. This is false. Locations where belligerents have been enjoined in armed conflict will avail opportunities to learn something. You only need to relate the battle or engagement in terms of the tactical, operational, or strategic levels of war. You also have the obligation to relate the moral, mental, and

physical aspects as well. No matter what common rank the group is, the natural tendency is for that group to digress to what is comfortable. This generally refers to things that are tactical. You have to fight that urge and force subordinates to see the bigger picture. Here are some useful thoughts to maintain when building your battle study:

- A director for the exercise (Waldron, 1918:6). One person that knows what points need to be drawn out of the subordinates about the historical fight and somebody that is capable of making subordinates think about how or if they would fight the same fight today using today's weapons and technology.
- Knowing your target audience. This allows you to reinforce what they should already know and allows you to develop what they need to know for their future development.
- Comparing and contrasting the Art and the Science of War. Naturally you are going to spend considerable time on the art of war by discussing the tactics that were used during that time. You will also find that your subordinates will naturally gravitate toward it. Take the time to understand the science of war and the contribution of technology to the fight that you are studying.
- Study of the personalities that fought the battle. Avoid assigning your subordinates historical personalities. Give them pieces of the battle and emphasize decisions that were made. Make them explain why certain decisions were made relative to that personality's character that made them. This is the best way to learn from somebody else's mistakes.
- Study the terrain. Recent experience has shown me that young leaders with only combat experience from Iraq tend to view all future combat in terms of a featureless desert or urban terrain. They forget that they might fight somewhere that has vegetation or hills. Get 1:50000 maps of the area that you are going to. Have subordinates draw overlays that explain the historical fight, but also how they would fight the battle today.
- Gather the proper tools. Have your subordinates bring digital cameras, compasses, Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and note-taking materials along with their maps of the area. They can always use the gathered information for reference in future professional papers that will likely be written for a school.
- Return to core competencies. This is perhaps the most important point. Talk about basic offensive and defensive operations relative to the audience that you are trying to teach. Whether you talk about building a

convention defence and the seven steps of engagement area development or a simple movement to contact, you will be able to talk about engineering or the use of pre-planned fires. The manner in which subordinates use to communicate instructions to their subordinates in the form of a five paragraph order still applies.

4.1. The crawl

If you choose to be the director of your battle study, then you will be doing the crawling. The amount of time that you will spend in preparing the material for the study is the most important piece of the study. You must gather the appropriate level reading material for your audience. On your shoulders rest the responsibility of reading the material and detecting potential pitfalls for your subordinates. Once you have a good knowledge of the material, begin to pose questions that will allow you to achieve your learning objectives. A simple way to create learning objectives is to use the U.S. Army's Battlefield Operating Systems or BOSs. They are as follows:

- Intelligence
- Manoeuvre
- Fire Support
- Air Defence
- Mobility and Survivability
- Combat Service Support
- Command and Control

By using these seven simple concepts you will be able to arrive at questions that pertain to each "area expert" that you assign.

Give your subordinate unit leaders a package with all of the material that they will need to accomplish their assigned tasks. Also provide them with other recommended reading material; suggestions that you don't provide to them. You will immediately notice who applies the extra time and effort because you will more than likely guess which of your subordinates will do this prior to you stepping off on the tour. This is an excellent way to see which of your subordinates are taking the work seriously. Your subordinates may decide to get together on their own over a beer and work on the project together. Encourage this! You are truly fortunate as a leader if your subordinates will take things that serious.

4.2. The walk

This is the time that you take to walk the battlefield on your staff ride. Take the time to think about parts of the field that will maximize the best learning objectives for the amount of time that you are allotted to do the tour. If you are studying a battle with a traditional offence and defence, then start out in the defensive engagement area and look at the terrain from the perspective of the offence. This will enable you to talk about the terrain in terms of where you could be seen by the defence and what terrain features would provide protection from enemy observation and enemy fire. Note terrain that you would call “key terrain”. Make sure that your subordinates understand if the offence would want a position for a support by fire position, then the enemy would probably have an observation post on that piece of terrain. Talk about the offensive reconnaissance effort and the defensive patrolling effort. What assets were available then, and what would you want today? Take the time to talk about the vegetation and the effects it would have on your operations and fires. The whole time that you are having the guided discussion, make your subordinates answer the “why”. Here you will experience your greatest joy when your subordinates can respond to their own questions faster than you were able to ask. You then know that “learning has occurred”. Once you have completed the historical perspective of the area, then talk about it in terms of how you would offensively operate in that particular area today. Take into consideration how you would move to the objective, be it mounted or dismounted. How would you set up a potential support by fire, and finally, how you would bring together your direct and indirect fire support plans to ensure correct geometries of fire to accomplish your mission. Make sure that your subordinates highlight the differences technologically and they relate it to the science of war. As you continue to walk toward the objective, pick an area that was a historical engagement area and ask why did the area achieve or fail to achieve the desired effect. This will enable you to talk about how you would do it today with the assets that you would have available to you. The key to this part of the exercise is to remind your subordinates about their troop to task and the amount of time required to achieve the desired engineer effect. Ensure that you tie this to your defensive fires plan for both direct as well as indirect weapons. Finally, as you reach the objective, talk about the human factors affecting the offence. Would the offence have reached its culminating point at this stage? How would the defence and the offence re-supply? Did

their communication assets allow them to talk to one another effectively? For the defence, did the positions that they chose make sense in relation to the terrain that they were on and the effects that they were able to achieve with their weapons? Does the terrain allow for you to employ a reverse slope defence? Could you employ a defence in depth to better accomplish the mission? Was there a better way to array forces based on their capabilities and limitations and how would you do it today?

4.3. The run

This is the unfortunate part that you will likely never see. This is when your subordinates get promoted and reassigned to later lead their own staff rides in the excellent example that you provided to them years before. The immediate short term effects you will likely see when your subordinates begin to apply the things that they learned in their next training operation. You will also likely see these lessons manifest themselves when your subordinates teach their own subordinates. If you are a company commander, have a conversation with one of your squad leaders and see what he has learned. The answers are sometimes shocking.

Conclusion

History is still the viable tool that it has always been for the military professional to learn from. The question is whether your subordinates are getting the right message from what you have them reading. As long as you understand the pitfalls associated with reading history, then you will be able to read it with a sense of objectivity and get something from it. Unemotional objectivity is often very difficult for anybody to achieve, but the rewards are great if we wish to pursue it. Recognize history for what it is and don't contribute to the "myth" that isn't. There is an undeniable link between success on the current battlefield and the time spent by leaders in study of past conflicts. The tangible benefits of developing decision-making skills and good judgment are obvious. The intangible benefit of developing a subordinate's character will be far reaching and life long. Returning a better American to society is our ultimate goal, whether it takes only four years or forty years. While the man is in our uniform, it is our charter to make him better than when he came into the service.

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