

Back to the Future

By Patricia Rhodes

Former curator of the NCO Museum (now called the NCO Heritage Center) in Fort Bliss, Texas

This article was published in the first edition of the NCO Journal (Spring 1991)

Dec. 6, 2017



First at Vicksburg

Confederate Lines, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 19 May 1863. In this assault against bitter resistance the 1st Battalion, 13th Infantry, lost forty-three percent of its men, but of the attacking force, it alone fought its color up the steep slope to the top. General Sherman called its performance "unequalled in the Army" and authorized the 13th Infantry to inscribe "First at Vicksburg" on its color. Although it took two more months of hard fighting to capture Vicksburg and split the Confederacy, no episode illustrates better the indomitable spirit of Americans on both sides. (Photo by U.S. Army Center of Military History)

"Read and meditate upon the wars of the greatest captains. This is the only means of rightly learning the science of war." - Napoleon

Many of the great generals, from Caesar to the present, have been lifelong students of military history. They viewed the pursuit of such knowledge as an important part of their professional self-development.

War, many believe, is both an art and a science, and to become a true military professional means becoming technically and tactically proficient. That proficiency can come in part through the study of the mistakes and successes of those who have gone before - military history.

Today, the principles of war are used, taught and discussed in nearly every Army academic setting, ranging from the National War College to the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy.

But even those who concede the value of the principles and the study of military history may be skeptical of their usefulness to the Noncommissioned officers of today's modern Army. NCOs don't plan campaigns, don't lead armies, and aren't involved in any kind of strategic planning.

But, while campaigns may be fought by armies, those armies are made up of much smaller units led by NCOs. Whether with Caesar at Alesia, Napoleon at Waterloo, or Rommel at Tobruk, individual soldiers and small unit leaders won or lost the battle and turned a campaign into a victory or a defeat.

If history has taught us anything, it is that leaders are leaders, regardless of rank.

U.S. Army historian Maurice Matloff wrote: "The citizen and the soldier cannot know what path to follow unless they are aware of the breadth of alternatives that have been accepted or rejected in the past. Santayana's dictum that those who ignore the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes, is nowhere more apt than in military history."

Some will argue that the face of war has changed, and the past has little relevance to the present. They believe that in an age of laser-guided weapons, nuclear artillery, satellite communications and stealth fighters, even the study of recent military actions is useless to the modern soldier.

"There are others," wrote historian David Chandler, "who hold diametrically opposite views, and avow that although weaponry and methods of communication have changed and continue to change with fearful rapidity, and increase in potential ... the essentials of the art of war remain immutable from age to age, however great the scientific developments."

"History," according to writer Bryan Perrett, "confirms that mobility holds the key to success and survival in the desert, whether it is exercised by cavalry, camel troops, or fully mechanized formations."

Perrett, tracing desert warfare from the Battle of Carrhae in 54 B.C. through the Arab-Israeli wars of the 1960s and '70s, found that all battles in the desert are "subject to rules which are harsh and inescapable."

Just as the rules of desert warfare remain constant, historian David Chandler discovered that "the essentials of generalship and man-management have not changed very dramatically over the years, and as much can be learned from the study of selected examples from the past as from recent experience."

There are dozens of examples, where those who might have used the past to predict the future did not, and the soldiers serving under them paid a terrible price.

German military analyst Generalmajor Alfred Toppe asserts that before World War II, "not a soul in the German armed forces imagined land warfare outside of Europe Prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, no preparations of any sort had been made in the German army for any desert warfare that might possibly become necessary in the future."

But for every example of a warrior who paid for ignoring the lessons of history, there is another example of one who succeeded by heeding its lessons. Again, Bryan Perrett notes that during the nineteenth century there were many desert conflicts: The British in Egypt and the Sudan, the French in Algeria and Morocco, the Italians in Eritrea and Abyssinia, the Russians in Central Asia.

Their combined experience was digested by Charles Callwell in his book *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, which was a particular favorite of Field Marshal Montgomery.

Historians often are surprised at the similarities between leaders, battles, and campaigns even across centuries.

"Judas Maccabaeus, the famed Jewish warrior of antiquity," wrote Lewis Gann in *Guerrillas in History*, "would have had little to learn from Mao Tse-Tung concerning the art of mounting guerrilla actions and expanding them into a national war." The guerrilla methods used by Judas were unknowingly duplicated by the Chinese ruler 2,000 years later.

Gann also reports that, "when Clausewitz, the greatest military theoretician of the nineteenth century, analyzed the conditions required for successful guerrilla warfare, he came to conclusions that were similar ... to those reached by Giraldus Cambrenis in the very early Middle Ages."

Students of military history remember Clausewitz as the man who developed the principles of war. Though a hundred years old, they are the same principles upon which the United States Army of the 1990s bases its modern Air Land Battle doctrine. The principles remain just as valid today as they did a century before, though Clausewitz had never seen a tank, a missile or a computer.

"Fools," said Prince Otto von Bismark, "say they learn by experience. I prefer to profit by other people's experience."

The drawbacks of learning only from our own experiences are that one person's experiences may be quite limited, and failures can often be extremely costly. Study, however, places at one's fingertips the collective experience of the ages.

They make the mistakes, we learn. They succeed, we learn.

We can learn about bearing, courage, competence, training, about strategy, tactics, and operations from the finest military minds of all time, and we should do so.

A complete list of military history books valuable to today's NCO would consist of many hundreds of titles. A few especially pertinent and timely ones are Bryan Perrett's *Desert Warfare*, Alfred Toppe's *Desert Warfare: the German Experience in World War II*, Richard Collier's *The War in the Desert*, Anthony H. Cordesman's *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: The Iran-Iraq War*, or any of the numerous biographies of Patton, Rommel, and Montgomery.

Lt. Col. William O. Darby did not overlook the study of military history, when he handed out "Roger's Rules" (see box), to his First United States Ranger Battalion - Darby's Rangers - in World War II.

Later "Roger's Rules" were distributed to soldiers arriving in Vietnam. They also appear in the Ranger Handbook, and have been called "A Ranger's Bible."

Written by Maj. Robert Rogers, they detail what every Ranger should know and do. They are as pertinent today as when Rogers wrote them in 1750.

Roger's Rules

- Don't forget nothing.
- Have your musket clean as a whistle, hatchet scoured, 60 rounds powder and ball, and be ready to march at a minute's warning.
- When you're on the march, act the way you would if you was sneaking up on a deer. See the enemy first.
- Tell the truth about what you see and what you do. There is an army depending on us for correct information. You can lie all you please when you tell other folks about the Rangers, but don't never lie to a Ranger or officer.
- Don't never take a chance you don't have to.
- When we're on the march, we march single file, far enough apart so one shot can't go through two men.
- If we strike swamps, or soft ground, spread out abreast, so it's hard to track us.
- When we march, we keep moving till dark, so as to give the enemy the least possible chance at us.
- When we camp, half the party stays awake while the other half sleeps.
- If we take prisoners, we keep 'em separate till we have had time to examine them.
- Don't ever march home the same way. Take a different route so you won't be ambushed.
- No matter whether we travel in big parties or little ones, each party has to keep a secure 20 yards ahead, 20 yards in the rear, so the main body can't be surprised and wiped out.
- Every night you'll be told where to meet if surrounded by a superior force.
- Don't sit down to eat without posting sentries. Don't sleep beyond dawn. Dawn's when the French and Indians attack.
- Don't cross a river by a regular ford.
- If somebody's trailing you, make a circle, come back into your own tracks, and ambush the folks that aim to ambush you.
- Don't stand up when the enemy's coming against you. Kneel down, lie down, hide behind a tree.
- Let the enemy come till he's almost close enough to touch. Then let him have it and jump out and finish him up with your hatchet.