

Why study military history?

By Command Sgt. Maj. Wade P. Hampton

11th Air Defense Artillery Brigade

Published in the NCO Journal's 1992 winter issue

May 11, 2018



Maj. Gen. John W. "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division, left, congratulates 2nd Lieutenant Audie L. Murphy, after awarding him the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star medal. Gen. Alexander Patch, 7th Army commander, presented Murphy the Medal of Honor later that day. Murphy earned both a battlefield commission and the Medal of Honor for his valor in France. By studying the common traits of good leaders, you might find something to improve or inspire your leadership. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Military History Institute)

In the winter of 1778, Washington led his Army into its winter encampment, what we now call Valley Forge. His Army had been in the field for three years, training for three years and led by officers for three years. This Army was not all that it could be: It was not fit to fight, it had never won a campaign and it was not proud. It was, in fact, a poorly led, poorly disciplined and defeated Army.

That winter, Washington did several things to improve his Army, but the most important thing was to allow Baron von Steuben to form a noncommissioned officer Corps. During the harsh winter, that Corps established discipline and training and provided sound leadership to soldiers.

This Corps of special men - the first American NCOs - allowed Washington to march out of Valley Forge with some of the finest light infantry units in the world.

For most NCOs, there is a tendency to equate the study of history as something that was, and still is, an exclusive concern of officers. But I want to tell you how and why NCOs should study history.

Whether spoken or present in practice, professionalism is part of today's NCO Corps. A professional is an expert in a particular field who constantly strives for improvement. This drive is useless without knowledge of the past. Learning from your mistakes can be a painful process. Learning from the mistakes of others is painless and easy.

History gives us a way of looking at how other people in other days accomplished their missions.

The study of military history is a key to self-improvement for the professional NCO. NCOs must know the roots of their profession. How and why did the NCO evolve into his current role?

"Training the trainers" is a current phrase we use. However, isn't it intriguing that this was being practiced as early as 1778?

When reading about von Steuben's model company, you are struck by the similarities of his approach and today's Army.

He taught an elite group of men a unique method of warfighting. These men passed those lessons along to others.

The victory at Yorktown, a victory that won our independence, can be said to have been earned on the drill fields at Valley Forge.

NCOs cannot truly understand their profession, or the soldiers they lead, until they study their past. In that study, the NCO needs to look at leaders who were both good and bad. One can learn about what made leaders successful or unsuccessful. History reveals a lot about the decisions they made.

The most important part of the study of history is applying lessons learned. This helps us avoid past mistakes and precludes us from trying things that have not been proven by our experiences. For example: Maintenance of personal equipment and weapons has always been an NCO's job. But what can happen when this task is forgotten or ignored? Read about Task Force Smith in 1950 and you'll find the answer to that question.

You can learn a lot about famous soldiers. You might be surprised at what you can learn. Few people, for example, know that Audie Murphy was initially rejected by the Marine Corps and as a paratrooper. But the National Guardsman went on to become an NCO, earn a battlefield commission and become the most decorated American of World War II

commission and become the most decorated American of World War II.

By looking at the common traits of good leaders, you might find something to improve or inspire your leadership.

Tradition surrounds us in the military. Yet, in most cases, we are not aware of what it really is. How many soldiers know the how and why of the many bugle calls that are played on the installation? Where did "taps" and "tattoo" come from and why are they played today? What is the meaning of all the formations and parades that we have in the military?

Let us start now to preserve the past so that it will enhance our performance and guide us into the future.