

Professional Reading for the Profession of Violence

by 1stLt Thomas Smith

Professional reading is a fundamental duty, much as physical fitness and marksmanship are.

The profession of arms is just that—a profession. So it's somewhat surprising to find many Marines and military professionals ignoring the one thing that is central to every profession: the determined study of the profession's theories and principles. It is true that Marines study the *Guidebook* and occasionally refer to field manuals, but that is not what I mean. What I am referring to is the concentrated study of war and its principles, something I have found few Marines doing, particularly noninfantry Marines.

This neglect undoubtedly arises from a combination of things. Some will say they have no time to spend reading. Others will say that the essence of being a Marine is not reading, but fighting. And while there is some truth in these answers, I believe there is another, more complete explanation for this neglect: Marines don't fully appreciate how the study of war can help them become a better Marine warrior. Significantly, and logically, this lack of appreciation seems to be more acute in military occupational specialties (MOSs) other than 03XX. Marine cooks, mechanics, and computer programmers simply have a harder time understanding how the study of Robert E. Lee and his campaigns will help them be a better Marine.

So the real question becomes not, "Why are Marines not studying war?" but rather, "Why *should* Marines, particularly noninfantry Marines, study war?" I will approach this issue from two fronts. First, I will argue that Marines should not look at the study of war as a tool of self-promotion or self-service, but instead should view it as a duty. Second, I will show that the study of war does indeed make one a better warrior. And finally, I will show how the individual Marine can get started in a professional reading program.

The Study of War: A Marine's Duty

Why should the Marine—especially the noninfantry Marine—view the study of war as a duty? For several reasons. The title "Marine" carries with it many duties. And a few seem to stand out. For example, Marines take great pride in their marksmanship, in their physical conditioning, and in their "warrior" identity. From the moment they become Marines, these virtues are indelibly etched into their psyches. Consequently, Marines devote considerable time to each one. They view them as duties—the price one must continually pay for being a Marine, regardless of MOS.

Along with these virtues, the Commandant, through his professional reading program, also urges Marines to engage in the study of war. He does so because he knows it increases the professional competence of his Marines. And he believes that this increased competence leads to a more elite fighting force of warriors. As with rifle range training and physical conditioning, we must create the time to study war and the characteristics of the great warriors. It should, in fact, become second nature—just like physical fitness training.

Professionals, by the very definition of the term, must dutifully study the theoretical aspects of their profession. (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines a profession as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation.") Therefore, Marines, as consummate military professionals, should be no different. They should take the term "professional" seriously and do what professionals do: study incessantly. It is not good enough to simply call yourself a military professional; you must work, and continually work, to prove the point.

Yet it is not enough to simply compel Marines to study war. It is an intellectual exercise and therefore one that cannot be forced on the unwilling. People simply will not learn if they don't want to. So Marines must be convinced that the study of war increases professional competence. For this, I consult history.

Historical Example: The Study of War Creates Competence

One way to gauge the effectiveness of studying war is to look at the accomplishments of some military leaders known to have studied war. There should be a correlation between studying war and success on the battlefield. If there isn't, then the study of war descends to the level of pleasure reading. Fortunately, there is a correlation. There are numerous examples of military leaders who have studied war with great determination and have accomplished astounding things on the battlefield. And while there are, of course, some examples of great military leaders who didn't study war—Grant said, "I consider remembrances of old campaigns a disadvantage. . . . War is progressive"—there are many more who did: Napoleon, Lee, Jackson, Eisenhower, Patton, Giap, and the German general staff (Guderian, Manstein, Student, and Rommel).

Since I am particularly fond of the tactical achievements and leadership traits of Confederate LtGen Thomas Jonathan (Stonewall) Jackson, I was delighted to find that he studied war. G.F.R. Henderson, in his superb biographical account of Jackson, *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War*, recounts how the mighty Stonewall was thoroughly versed in that art of war:

His knowledge of history made him familiar with the principles which had

guided Washington and Napoleon in the selection of objectives, and with the means by which they attained them. [In] the case of Stonewall Jackson [we] have much evidence, indirect, but unimpeachable, as to the value to a commander of the knowledge thus acquired. The Maxims of Napoleon, carried in his haversack, were constantly consulted throughout his campaigns, and this little volume contains a fairly complete exposition, in Napoleon's own words, of the grand principles of war. . . . It is clear, therefore, that he had studied the campaigns of the great Corsican in order to discover the principles on which military success is based; that having studied and reflected on those principles, and the effect their application produced, in numerous concrete cases, they became so firmly imbedded in his mind as to be every present, guiding him into the right path, or warning him against the wrong, whenever he had to deal with a strategic or tactical situation.

Napoleon took the time to tell aspiring young officers how to master the art of war and become a great military leader. In fact, in his 78th and final maxim in *The Military Maxims of Napoleon*, created in 1831, he wrote:

Read again and again the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Eugene and Frederick. Model yourself upon them. This is the only means of becoming a great captain, and of acquiring the secret of the art of war. Your own genius will be enlightened and improved by this study, and you will learn to reject all maxims foreign to the principles of these great commanders.

There have been other examples of men who have understood the importance of the study of war. As early as 1513 A.D. there was Machiavelli saying:

But as to exercise for the mind, the prince ought to read history and study the actions of eminent men, see how they acted in warfare, examine the causes of their victories and defeats in order to imitate the former and avoid the latter.

Then, Antoine Henri Jomini, who said, "Military history, accompanied by sound criticism, is indeed the true school of war." And finally, Bismarck, whose quote, while being deceptively simple, captures the essence of what these men were saying: "Fools say that they learn by experience. I prefer to profit by others' experience."

History also reveals that the study of

war is not limited simply to improving the competence of a single professional. It can—if done properly and on a much larger scale—transform an entire army into a force of competent warriors. One such example is the German Army, arguably the best modern army the world has ever seen. The way in which the Germans mastered the art and science of war mystified—and petrified—nation after nation. How did they become so great? One reason is certainly the *Kriegsakademie*. Operating from 1815 to 1945, this institution was dedicated solely to the study of war. It was Prussia's, and later Germany's, equivalent to our Army and Navy War Colleges. Its 3-year curriculum studied the rudiments of war—strategy, tactics, weaponry, military history, and fortifications.

Without digressing on all the distinctions between the *Kriegsakademie* and the War Colleges, it is enough at this point to identify the principal distinction: The *Kriegsakademie* had a unparalleled academic reputation, both inside and outside the military, as good an academic reputation as the best civilian universities today. But the worth of the *Kriegsakademie* was not so much in its academic prowess as it was in its ability to train officers for war, or, in the words of Trevor Dupuy, to "institutionalize military excellence." These officers led the German Army from one victory to another. Martin van Creveld, in his book *Training For Officers*, noted that "to judge by results achieved between 1866 and 1945, the German system for teaching officers how to command in war has never been equaled in the modern world."

What all this shows is that the study of war can increase one's capacity to wage war skillfully and competently. It certainly has worked for the great men of the past who have applied themselves. And it can even work for an entire profession and nation, as Germany has illustrated.

Professional Reading: Getting Started

The Commandant's professional reading program is an important step in the right direction. By emphasizing the study of war, the Commandant is helping to produce a Corps of professionally competent Marines, much the way the *Kriegsakademie* did. But, again, the reading program by itself has not been enough to convince all, or even a

majority of, Marines to study war. And it also hasn't told the individual Marine how to get started in the study of war. One of the most frequent questions I hear from Marines concerning the study of war is, "What books should I start reading first?" And usually I respond with another question. "Well, what *area* of military history do you want to start with?" Putting it simply, the enormity of published material on war and warfighting will stagger even the most resolute student of war. So to make it easier, one must apply an old military maxim—divide and conquer. Early on I chose to divide my military study into four groups. And while the four groups do not cover everything needing to be studied in a professional reading program, they do help the beginning professional get started. The four groups are:

- Biographies
- Weapons and Armament
- Battle and Campaign Accounts
- Military Forces of the World

But before picking up a book to study, one must understand what to look for. Therefore, I now discuss each of these four areas and the material benefits that each Marine leader, both commissioned and noncommissioned, can hope to gain.

Biographies:

With military biographies, the student will glean the attributes and characteristics that made some commanders great and others awful. These attributes and characteristics form the commander's leadership style—what John Keegan appropriately called (and what he titled one of his books), the mask of command. Most new Marine lieutenants and junior noncommissioned officers really don't know what constitutes good, competent leadership. Sure, they look around and observe and try to emulate what they think is good leadership, but they can't be too sure. That's where biographies provide the answer. They show the student what is good leadership. After all, the techniques, methods, and personality traits of the great military commanders have been tested and retested—battle-tested. It's not that observing and emulating is a bad practice; in fact, it's a great practice. But it isn't enough, by itself, to help new Marine leaders form their very own mask.

Being able to form a competent mask of command is one of the most important things the student of war can gain. In fact, some say that leadership—and forming your mask—is the most important disposition to have for good performance in battle. Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage put the value of leadership in its proper perspective in their book *Crisis in Command*:

Millions of soldiers have been annihilated over thousands of years for many reasons: fundamental inferiority in strength, tactics, and weaponry; poor organization and strategy, treachery, adverse weather, and repeatedly dismal and poor leadership. One factor virtually guaranteeing poor military performance is bad leadership and its destructive effect on group cohesion.

So read the biographies and continue to observe and emulate, and stuff it all into your mask of command. Then don your mask and confidently go forth and command.

Another benefit of military biographies is that of problem-solving. Every commander has had complex military problems put before him begging for solutions. Seeing how others have confronted these problems and formulated solutions is particularly important. What factors did the commander take into account, and which ones did he purposefully ignore? By standing in the shoes of the commander, feeling the things he felt, and seeing the things he saw, we can better hope to sidestep quagmires that we would have otherwise fallen into.

Weapons and Armament:

This is the part of the study of war that most closely resembles the professions of law and medicine because of its arcane vernacular, something that only professions seem to have a monopoly on. Before a military professional can even begin to communicate, a disentanglement of curious codes and acronyms must take place. What, by God, is a SMAW? An Mk19? An AAV7A1? Or how about a TOW? An LCAC? An M249 SAW? A HMMWV? A Stinger? An MLRS? A Dragon? The irreducible minimum is understanding what these acronyms mean. After all, one must be able to communicate. But more important, one must learn what the tools of the trade do. How can each of these weapon systems be deployed? When? And where? Under

what conditions can they be used? One must understand how the military objective can be obtained through the application of these tools.

Along with the lethality of warfare, the complexity and diversity of weapons systems has grown almost exponentially, even since World War II. The mastery of the tools is required, now more than ever, because the modern-day professional who can employ all his tools with efficiency will have taken a long step toward victory. The overwhelming success of Operation DESERT STORM proves this point like no other.

Battle and Campaign Accounts:

Contained in the study of specific battles is perhaps the most substantive thing a student of war can learn—the principles of warfare. After studying battle account after battle account, the student will begin to realize there are indeed principles to this game called war. And they have not changed, even since the time of Alexander the Great. Alexander and all the commanders up to the present used what they had on hand to exploit these principles, but the principles themselves have not changed. That is why the study of old campaigns is not obsolete. The student will see, even to this day, how very important rapidity of movement is . . . and surprise . . . and deception . . . and maneuver . . . and economy of force . . . and massing. But, as the student will also find, these are principles, not laws. They can be discarded and ignored, but at your own risk. If they couldn't be, Robert E. Lee would not have won at Chancellorsville. In that battle, Lee violated one of the great maxims of warfare: don't divide a numerically inferior army in the face of a superior one. He ignored it, split his Army of Northern Virginia, not once but *twice*, and achieved one of the most astounding victories in all of warfare. Principles, not laws.

If one has a hard time figuring out what the principles of war are, I would recommend books by the prominent military historians and theorists, namely, John Keegan, J.F.C. Fuller, B.H. Liddell Hart, and Trevor Dupuy, who wrote a profound little book called *Understanding War* in which he delineates all the principles of war along with some others that he has termed "The

Timeless Verities of Combat." This book is perfectly suited to someone who is just beginning the study of war.

Another aspect that deserves more than a little attention is strategy. Vietnam rattled and shook this Nation to the core, and all because of its strategy of revolutionary war—or should I say because of our military's inability to grasp it and provide an effective counterstrategy. Strategy needs to be studied in detail. LtGen Phillip B. Davidson, USA(Ret), recently published his second book, *The Secrets of the Vietnam War*, and in it he discusses Vietnam's strategy of revolutionary war and what the United States could have done to effectively counter it. This book, along with his first book, *Vietnam at War*, should be required reading for every military professional, particularly American military professionals.

The study of battles will also show you, in the frankest terms, what you can expect to face as a warrior. This is another reason why the study of old and even ancient battles is still applicable today. War has not really changed—only the tools have. So much of warfare is still moving masses of armed men and equipment to far-off, unfriendly places. The armed men of the Greek phalanx and the Roman legion experienced the same emotion the modern-day warrior experiences—fear. Battle is still a horrifyingly bloody business with the killing of human beings at its core. The weather and terrain still exhibit the same unharassed ruthlessness that they did long ago. The men before battle still display the same somber moods, dry throats, camaraderie, and longing for home that warriors of all times have displayed. For the fighting man, war has not changed; it's the same brutal game with different tools.

Military Forces of the World:

I mean for this last category to be broader than its name suggests. It should, in any event, range from the specific order of battle for each country to the theoretical aspects of how a military force functions—how it is distinguished from a mob.

It is important to know the military forces of the world. After all, they might be your enemy one day. What becomes apparent, even early on, is that countries have taken vastly differ-

ent approaches in organizing their men and women for battle. Some are heavy on the armor side while others concentrate on artillery, infantry, air power, or naval power. And some, like the former Soviet Union, concentrate on all. In short, it is beneficial to see how other military forces are organized, equipped, and trained to fight.

Another thing that is fascinating is the study of the world's elite forces, from counterterrorist units to conventional modern-day shock troops. These are the units that seem to be the most needed in these troubled days of terrorism and hostage-taking. Study the great units of the world—Britain's SAS and SBS, Israel's Sarayet Matkal (Unit 269), Germany's GSG-9, America's Delta Force and SEAL teams, France's GIGN and French Foreign Legion—and you will come away with nothing less than a feeling of awe and reverence. Also, the study of these units will decrease the amount of ethnocentrism that all warriors bring to the planning table when they are about to face the enemy. A salubrious dose of respect is a good quality to have. Underestimating your enemy—and overestimating yourself—has happened too many times to bear repeating here.

At the other end of this category is an analysis of the factors that distinguish a military force from a mob. The student will learn how very important discipline is, as are leadership, unit cohesion, unit identity, loyalty, and proficiency in the use of weapons. What comprises unit cohesion, and how do you get it? What are the signs of a cohesive military unit breaking down? Gabriel and Savage's *Crisis in Command* is perhaps one of the best books to answer these questions. For the officer who must command troops in battle, a thorough study of this aspect of war cannot be ignored.

In the inset, I have outlined a list of books that I have found particularly enlightening. Although most of the books fit more than one category, I have put them in the category that most accurately reflects their essence.



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Author's Recommended Reading List

Biographies:

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 Blumenson, Martin, *The Patton Papers* (Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
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Weapons and Armament:

- Bonds, Ray, *The Modern U.S. War Machine* (Crown, 1987).
 Dupuy, Trevor, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare* (Hero Books, 1984).
 Gervasi, Tom, *The Arsenal of Democracy* (Grove, 1981).
 Luttwak, Edward, *The Pentagon and the Art of War* (Simon & Schuster, 1986).

Battles and Campaign Accounts:

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 Herzog, Chaim, *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (Random House, 1982).
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 Mitchell, Joseph, *Decisive Battles of the Civil War* (EPM Publications, 1988).
 Schemmer, Benjamin F., *The Raid* (Avon, 1986).

Military Forces Of The World:

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 Dupuy, Trevor, *A Genius For War* (Hero Books, 1984).
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 Hogg, Ian V., *The Israeli War Machine* (Quarto Publishing, 1983).
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