

PROFESSIONAL READING

# Interactive Reading and the Art of War

by Col Walter Davis

*By applying what the Germans used to call the 'applicatory method,' Marines can employ military history as a powerful learning tool.*

For several years, I have been obsessed with professional reading lists. Even before the recent resurrection of the historical study of the art of war, I collected reading lists with the zeal of an antique collector. Among my professional papers are recommended reading lists from the U.S. Army's Infantry School, the Armor School, the U.S. Military Academy's "Professional Reading Guide," the U.S. Marine Corps Professional Reading Program, and Jay Luvaas' "Fire or Flood" list. Additionally, I can count several unofficial lists with titles like a "Warrior's Reading List" and "Reading for Operational Art." I even acquired a copy of Gen George Patton's reading list and library contents.

My list collecting, while less expensive than other hobbies and certainly not professionally harmful, has been misguided. Yes, I collected lists and read books, always looking for the one book or bit of knowledge that would provide the key to military success on the battlefield. However, I collected perfunctory knowledge and military trivia like old baseball cards. Worse, I was guilty of gleaning specific examples from a battle or campaign and using them to support principles of war or doctrine. Yet I did not read military theory. Thus, I was intellectually incapable of analyzing the principles and, therefore, accepted them at face value. I was like a doctor who knew all of the symptoms of a disease, but didn't have a clue as to what caused the disease.

Recently, however, I read a book, an old book, that caused me to stop and think about how we read military

history and how most modern military history is written. In the bowels of the Military History Institute, I came across a dust-covered, yellowed copy of G.F.R. Henderson's *The Battle of Spicheren: A Study in Practical Tactics and War Training*, a second edition published in 1909. Spicheren was one of the first major battles of the Franco-German War of 1870-71, a war with which most American military personnel are only vaguely familiar.

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I read the book and was struck by two major points. First, most modern military history or writing is not written to teach or educate, but to give an account or description of a campaign or battle. Second, most of us, myself included, read passively; i.e., we expect the author to tell us what we need to know. There is no intellectual interaction with the author. The reader doesn't question, evaluate, or analyze the material, and sadly most authors are probably glad we don't.

Perhaps I can best illustrate my observation by comparing Henderson's book with a recent bestseller, *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* by MajGen Hal Moore, USA, and Joe Galloway. The book is a compelling account of the 1st Cavalry Division's battle against the North Vietnamese Army units in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965.

First, Moore and Galloway's book has better maps than most modern

books and also includes aerial photography. However, they pale in comparison with Henderson's maps, sketches, and hand-drawn panoramas. The average modern military history book never includes enough maps, and panorama drawing appears to be a lost art. Moore and Galloway spend a couple of paragraphs on the terrain and its importance, but Henderson spends pages on describing the battlefield and then goes over the advantages and disadvantages of the positions of each side.

Both books give a blow-by-blow, minute-by-minute account of the battle, although Henderson's is much more comprehensive in detail and scope.

Henderson, however, pauses at times to critique or evaluate decisions such as the German advanced guard as he interjects "to arrive at a just conclusion as to the proper strength for an advanced guard, we consider the duties it is expected to perform." He then proceeds to evaluate the German formation, taking into account the mission, doctrine, terrain, and enemy.

Moore and Galloway tell us "what" happened during the battle, but often the reader is left searching for the "why." Henderson repeatedly compares the evidence available to the commanders with the actual facts and uses this approach to highlight how erroneous deductions are made in war. Usually, he summarizes a point with a course of action the commander could or should have chosen given the information available.

This didactic approach is used throughout the book, and in Appendix III Henderson even offers 31 questions covering tactical points for the reader to answer. Moore and Galloway make some points, but, as many of the actors are still alive, there appears to be a reluctance to criticize fellow soldiers for decisions that led to hundreds of American dead and wounded. The reader is left to ask and frame the questions. Or worse, the reader will accept the account with no questions asked. For example, Moore and Galloway could have discussed the 2/7 Cavalry's lack of overhead and ground reconnaissance prior to moving to their new landing zone or their lack of artillery planning and preparation fires to support their move. Further, they could have discussed the higher headquarters during the battle and why they failed to act or change priorities. Henderson would have done all of this and more.

Currently, didactic military books are out of fashion. This is a shame, as I learned as much from Henderson's old book as from 10 modern books from one of my lists. And I don't mean knowledge about an obscure war fought in 1870, but about decisionmaking and getting inside the head of an officer and seeing what he sees (panoramas) and feeling what he feels. Without risk, I was able to interact in hundreds of tactical decisions that will, at worse, aid my decision-making and, at best, increase my tactical and operational breadth and scope.

Henderson, at least as read in *The Battle of Spicheren*, is more than a historian. The narrative is there, but he also displays the talents of military critic and teacher. You can't read the book without becoming involved in the battle or stimulated to ask questions.

Today, the average reader doesn't interact with the author, and the author doesn't make it easy for the reader to stop and say "why?" or "what

would I do now?" or best of all, "isn't there an alternative here?" Modern military books aren't didactic and are so poorly organized that it takes an energetic reader to ferret the material out and ask the right questions.

The intent isn't there. Military history today is largely narrative, and the more sensational the battle the better. Many books today follow the sequential narrative approach, but the view is so narrow and single minded that many readers just follow along deluged in detail, thus forgetting what questions to ask and what else was going on.

My advice is this. First, the student needs an underpinning or foundation. This can be gained from read-

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ing any number of books on the history of warfare. Archer Jones' *The Art of War in the Western World* is a good choice. Second, pick a battle or cam-

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paign and select a book from one of the lists. Third, get a pencil and paper to take notes and a map of the area that you can write on. Fourth, read the book and write down any points and questions that you have. Fifth, and this is the hard part, think about what you have read.

The fifth step can become intuitive, but the following may help to organize your thoughts:

(1) Study the terrain as if you were going to plan an operation or fight there.

(2) Write down the missions of the various units or what you think the missions were.

(3) For any decision, ask the question, why?

(a) Ascertain the information available to the decisionmaker.

(b) Ascertain what the decision maker knew, when he knew it, and who he told what he knew. Look at what he didn't know.

(c) Balance the information available with the facts as best you can.

(d) Evaluate the decision.

(e) Offer your own course of action using the restraints and constraints of the original actor.

(f) Look for alternatives not taken—even when the original decision was successful.

Using a method like this is not a panacea, but it gets you involved with the author. The reader thus becomes interactive and doesn't passively sit and read, soaking up facts soon to be forgotten.

Now there are problems to be overcome in this pursuit. It is probably impossible to reconstruct a battle completely. Some information will be absent, some incorrect, and some will contradict. However, notwithstanding the limitations, the important thing is the process; i.e., evaluating the material in a logical, interactive manner. The facts, or who won or lost, are less important for the military professional than why the actors did what they did. By sharing this process with the actors

through the author, the reader can gain that certain insight that on battlefields, yet unknown, may help us to anticipate what will occur.



>Col Davis, a graduate of Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the U.S. Army War College, is CO of the 8th Marines.