



SOME THOUGHTS ON PROFESSIONALISM

Martin Blumenson

IT TOOK American career officers about 150 years to have their status as professionals accepted by their countrymen. Although the opening of the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1802 made evident general recognition that the military calling was a profession requiring not only specialized knowledge, but also special education, the American people have, throughout most of their history, been loath to give career soldiers

the respect that members of other professions have commanded.

This is a strange phenomenon, for the pages of American history are full of military exploits and military leaders—from George Washington, through Andrew Jackson and Ulysses S. Grant, to Dwight D. Eisenhower—who have been accorded the highest honor and responsibility a grateful nation could offer. Despite the fact that the Army made possible, to an

extent still largely unappreciated, the westward expansion of the Nation—by guarding the frontier, exploring and establishing routes of communication, and maintaining law and order—most Americans regarded the soldier as being somehow outside the confines of normal society. War, to most Americans, was an aberration, to be done with as rapidly as possible so that the Nation could return to peace—and normality.

Part of this was due, I think, to the nature of the military profession itself. A relatively small group throughout most of the 19th century, Army officers served in some isolation on the periphery of the national life—on small western posts and in large coastal fortifications. In a narrow environment, they were outside the mainstream of American development, and many West Point graduates departed the service to build the bridges, roads, canals, and railways that seemed much more important to the national existence than did military life.

Part of this feeling seems to have come about because of the officers themselves who, with some significant exceptions, were not particularly professionally minded.

Early in the 20th century, and for a variety of reasons—the consequences of the war with Spain which thrust

Martin Blumenson is a staff historian with the Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington. He holds advanced degrees in history from Bucknell and Harvard Universities. The author of numerous articles in military and historical journals, his works include Breakout and Pursuit, one of the official volumes in the Army's World War II series.

the United States into a position of world prominence; the disappearance of the frontier; the impact of European military thought (particularly the revolution wrought by the German General Staff); and the emergence of the new industrial weapons—the US Army began to display a modern attitude toward the problems of warfare.

Modern Attitudes

The so-called Root reforms, the major one being the creation of the general staff, as well as the establishment of additional schools of training and of higher education, began to give Army officers a broad professional outlook. The problems encountered during the course of World War I contributed to the enlarged professionalism of the officer corps by making relevant such matters as industrial mobilization, manpower utilization, large-scale troop movements, and the deployment of large units in combat.

In the desuetude of the post-World War I period, a handful of officers maintained their professionalism and were thus able to be ready for the new problems imposed by World War II, a coalition struggle fought on a global scale. In the same way, Army officers on active duty today are preparing themselves to meet the problems of the future.

World War II was a watershed in the relations between the American public and the military services. Since that time, the American people have come to understand the precarious equilibrium of our world and the necessity for maintaining a large Military Establishment. Officers are no longer outside the mainstream of American life, but perform a vital function in protecting and conserving it. They are now recognized as professionals in the full sense of the

term, not only as the opposite of amateurs, but as having a knowledge acquired by study and experience.

Continuous Study

This brings me to my main point. An officer's career is shaped by a variety of influences, mainly his assign-

I heartily concur in the ideas expressed in the article entitled "Some Thoughts on Professionalism."

Military history presents a method by which career officers can keep their professionalism up to date. In this complex world of ours, maintaining professional proficiency is a difficult and vital task; one to which every forward-looking officer must give constant attention and effort.

More than ever, military history is playing an important role in the formulation of doctrine and plans. Never before has the Department of the Army staff called so often upon the Office of the Chief of Military History to furnish background papers and historical studies on problems of current interest and importance. An account of how these problems were or were not solved in the past offers significant signposts for those who are grappling with the increasingly complex problems that challenge us today.

Brig Gen Hal C. Pattison, USA
Chief of Military History

ments and his formal schooling in the Army's educational system. But to attain professional status is not the same as retaining it. A high level of proficiency is required at all times.

It is inconceivable to me that a physician can practice medicine, particularly in these days of rapid developments and startling discoveries,

without referring continuously to the literature of his profession.

In the same way and for the same reasons, military careerists who are interested in preserving and advancing their professional status must read works pertaining to their field of endeavor. The world has become so complex and the role of the soldier in that world so important and difficult that an officer who expects to make a significant contribution in his calling must continue to study throughout his career.

Military history offers one of the best opportunities for individual self-improvement. In the annals of the past can be found instruction on all phases of the military profession, unless it be on the detailed method of how to operate a piece of equipment in current use. Problems of command, logistics, tactics, strategy, and morale, for example, can be examined in the context of military history, not from a theoretical viewpoint, but from a strictly pragmatic position. In the experience of armies and commanders and staffs are to be found guidance for action in the present and future.

Cautions

There are certain cautions to be raised. Not all written history is good history. Some of it, perhaps a great deal, is inaccurate for one reason or another. Historians may not have looked at aspects of past experience that are particularly relevant today. Some historians incorporate a special plea in their writing, and their work takes on the nature of an apologia. And, of course, some history is simply dull and unreadable.

A reader must be selective in his choice of material. There is so much good history available, so much readable history being written, that it is

unnecessary for a reader to be bored.

Reading may be done in a variety of ways. One is for the sheer enjoyment of learning about people and events in the past, without giving much thought to the meaning of that experience.

Another form of reading is serious in motivation. It requires a running dialogue between reader and author. Since the writer is speaking through the printed page, the reader has the responsibility for initiating and continuing the conversation. The conversation, therefore one-sided, might go something like this: "Is this fellow right here?" "Has he presented the whole picture?" "Has he omitted information because he didn't know, or has he done so on purpose in order to make a point which would not otherwise be valid or hold up under scrutiny?" "What is the author driving at?" "What is he trying to say?" And so on.

Serious reading is instructive. It is instructive if the reader remains somewhat skeptical and difficult to convince. It is meaningful if it is related to the concerns of the reader. If the subject is military history and the reader is a career officer, what more direct relationship, what greater relevance of one to the other can be imagined?

New Requirement

It is sometimes said that the nuclear arsenal has eliminated the validity of all historical examples before 1945. Or, because of the tremendous and profound changes imposed on warfare by the creation of nuclear weapons, there is no longer any reason to look to the past for guidance. Everything, it is said, has changed.

This is not so. The development of nuclear weapons has imposed a new

requirement on military thinkers. A doctrine for using these new weapons must be formulated. Would it not be reasonable to suppose that the experience of earlier military thinkers, who had to grapple with the then revolutionary implications of gunpowder, might have relevance to what is essentially the same problem today?

Furthermore, despite the development of the new weapons of our age, man himself has changed little. His basic needs and fears, his fundamental motivations, remain much the same. The functions of leadership and morale are what they have always been.

What is more, the pushbutton weapons of terror have in our time been replaced, for the moment at least, by an underground warfare of terror. Yet, the guerrilla wars that absorb our attention today are not so altogether different from—to choose but one of many examples—the fighting waged in 1902 by the Boers in South Africa. How the British Army won the Boer War can be instructive to our generation of careerists facing somewhat the same problems.

Variety

It might be well here to raise another word of caution. If anyone expects the solutions of the past to fit exactly the problems of the present, he is going to be disappointed. If he tries to make them fit, he is foolish.

For one of the great teachings of history is the infinite variety of life and experience. Situations in the past may resemble situations we are acquainted with today. But never exactly.

Therefore, there is no such thing as "lessons" of history, lessons to be lifted out of context and applied to problems besetting us. Similarities exist. But so do differences. And it is

important for the reader who is studying the past in order to find guidance in the present to be as aware of the differences as he is of the similarities.

What history teaches is skepticism. What it gives is wisdom. Out of wisdom may come faith and hope, tempered by a sense of reality.

It has become cliché to say—as Aristotle, Moltke, and Santayana have said in their various ways—that a man who does not profit from his mistakes is condemned to repeat them. But the fact remains—a man who does not learn from the experience of others is foolish indeed.

A careerist in the military service may spend virtually a lifetime preparing for action. Inexperienced when his opportunity to perform in a time of crisis arrives, a novice when the time comes for him to carry out the precepts of his training and knowledge, he will be better ready to do his duty if he has benefited from the experiences of those who have preceded him.

A tremendous storehouse in the literature of military history awaits the curious, the interested, and the professionally minded career officer. Choose well.

In the 16th Century a man whose name comes down to us today as more of an expert on political intrigue than anything to do with leadership wrote a book called *The Prince*. The man, of course, was Niccolò Machiavelli, and his book is a classic on the relationships of states and their rulers. Machiavelli wrote, "To exercise the intellect a man should read histories, and study there the actions of illustrious men, to see how they have borne themselves in war, to examine the causes of their victories and defeats."

General Earle G. Wheeler