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History in Digital Age: Why Military Professionals Need It

By Ong Wei Chong

SYNOPSIS

History matters for the military professional. The overemphasis on pragmatism may however erode the fundamental value of inspiring the military professional as a lifelong learner.

COMMENTARY

IN 1961, the late Sir Michael Howard delivered a RUSI lecture on "[The Use and Abuse of Military History](#)". The context of his lecture was important as it specifically addressed academic concerns of military history being used as a tool of 'myth-making'.

Like Plato, Howard believed that myths play a useful social function in preparing young soldiers for the realities of war. The creation of a romanticised image of the past in 'myth-making' to inspire and sustain action is not an abuse of history, but a different function from the critical examination of military history by an academic historian or strategic thinker.

History as Stories that Connect

In the case of Singapore, its Second World War history is perceived as a usable past that can be used to draw out stories and analogies that connect with the present. Singapore's Second World War past, the battle and fall of Singapore to be precise, is an example where colonial war memory and remembrance co-exists alongside commemoration and nation-building lessons for an emergent nation-state.

Central to this approach are the stories of wartime resistance and sacrifice that seek to connect the military values of Singapore's colonial past to a present generation of military leaders that have not experienced war.

Walking past the honour roll of SAFTI Military Institute, home of Singapore's Officer Corps, an observer will be quick to spot a distinct difference from that of other military academies and colleges — an absence of names on the honour roll. The honour roll at SAFTI mirrors the Singapore Story of an 'accidental nation' that had to find its feet when independence was thrust on its shoulders in 1965.

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) was created out of strategic necessity rather than a revolutionary warfighting past. It is perhaps understandable why Singapore's Second World past remains a focal point for 'war stories' to inspire in the training of officer cadets and junior officers.

This narrow focus that relies on stories of wartime heroism and in certain cases romanticism as inspiration however is different from using military history to develop what military historian Elliot Cohen describes as the '[historical mind](#)' — 'a way of thinking that uses history as a mode of inquiry and a framework for thinking about problems'. The 'historical mind' approach to military history is a utilitarian one that looks to the history of war and warfare as a guide to decision making.

History Guiding Decision-making

Rather than look to the past for myths that connect, the 'historical mind' is employed to educate strategic thinkers in the SAF at the mid-career level. An example is how the Malayan Campaign and the Battle of Singapore is taught at the Goh Keng Swee Command and Staff College (GKS CSC).

Instead of learning stories of wartime heroism from Singapore's WWII past, students of strategic studies at GKS CSC approach the usable past as an exercise in contextual decision-making that puts them in the shoes of key decision-makers who are required to examine the critical 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions.

Dr Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's first defence minister, is well remembered for his intellectual curiosity. His reading on defence matters spanned from military journals to the classics of strategy — Sun Tze, Clausewitz and Liddell Hart. [Dr Goh](#) would go so far as to send Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew 'books and articles, sidelined and flagged, insisting that [the prime minister] must know enough to decide what [he] had to approve'.

This approach lies at the heart of the Clausewitzian approach to military history. To use history as a [guide to judgement](#). One that enables the military leader to refight campaigns and battles in all their ambiguity, contingency, danger and complexity. when students and makers of strategy look to historical examples to illuminate current predicaments, this is where the 'historical mind' meets the 'strategic mind'. It offers the student strategist the prospects of '[wisdom without tears](#)', insights without the costly sacrifice that a battlefield education might require.

Looking to military history for a usable past to enhance strategic judgement is essential for the military professional. Its utility however can be limited when historical examples are misused. On the potential to use and abuse military history, Clausewitz warned:

["Historical examples](#) clarify everything and also provide the best kind of proof in the

empirical sciences. This is particularly true of the art of war...Historical examples are, however, seldom used to such good effect...To teach the art of war entirely by historical examples...would be an achievement of the utmost value; but it would be more than the work of lifetime.”

History in Lifelong Learning

Before lifelong learning became a buzzword, Clausewitz was living it in the 19th Century. Just as the interpretation of Singapore’s military history is an ongoing process, it is crucial that Singapore’s military professionals embrace Clausewitz’s exhortation of lifelong learning in honing the ‘historical’ and ‘strategic mind’. It is a rigorous lifetime journey, not meant for the intellectual lazy, but the reward of clarifying the complexity of war far outweighs the effort.

There is however one fundamental roadblock in this journey – career path demands and curriculum loading that reduces lifelong learning to an exhortation embraced by a selected few. This challenge is not particularly unique to Professional Military Education (PME) in Singapore.

In the last decade, PME administrators and faculty have sought to find the right symbiotic balance between education, training, career-enhancement, curriculum load and rigour.

The question of why history matters for the military profession stems from a central intellectual tradition of using history as a framework for problem solving and inquiry. How this common intellectual tradition manifests itself, however, is influenced and shaped by different norms and values. In the Singapore context, the Singaporean norm of pragmatism hangs heavily. That and the penchant for curriculum loading may impede the very creativity and curiosity that sustains lifelong learning.

Singapore’s founding fathers such as Goh Keng Swee were intellectual giants and lifelong learners who were able to strike that balance between pragmatism, principles and inspiration in their decision-making.

The overemphasis on pragmatism as a value in PME may have the detrimental effect of eroding the other fundamental value of PME – to inspire the military professional as a lifelong learner. Rather than look to Singapore’s colonial past, it may be more useful to rediscover examples in Singapore’s recent history of how its founding fathers created that balance between pragmatism, principles and inspiration.

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