

# ARES & ATHENA<sup>14</sup>

FEBRUARY 2019

Don't look  
back in  
anger:  
How the  
study of  
war can  
benefit  
today's  
Army





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## FOREWORD

Both the previous and the current professional heads of the British Army believe that failure in warfare is as much about being out-thought as it is about being out-fought. They have both stressed the need for soldiers to take a 'professional interest in their profession'. In 2018, as the Army reflected upon the nature and character of warfare 100 years after the end of the First World War, the CHACR and the War Studies Departments of RMA Sandhurst and King's College London combined to reflect upon the use and abuse of military history by the military and academic professions. This issue of *Ares & Athena* seeks to capture some of that debate.

Some would hold, like A J P Taylor, that history has no value in terms of foresight, but is merely a vehicle to help us understand 'what happened'. Others, like Sir Michael Howard, warn us that history may be a very valuable tool in personal professional development, but only if studied properly, in width, depth and context. And many, such as Bismarck, Marx and Santayana, are quoted rather more starkly as believing that history repeats itself, and thus those who fail to learn from history are foolish and destined only to repeat its mistakes.

Clausewitz and Mark Twain, however, agree that history does not slavishly repeat itself, but rather that it has an unchanging nature and a changing character – its stanzas do not repeat each other, but they certainly rhyme: they have a sameness and a differentness. The CHACR's mission to the Army is: to conduct and sponsor research and analysis into the enduring nature and changing character of conflict on land, and to be an active hub for scholarship and debate within the Army, in order to develop and sustain the Army's conceptual component of fighting power.

Those who take the time to read through and reflect upon this issue of *Ares & Athena* will hopefully be better informed as to how a well-developed engagement with military history, delivered by both practitioners and academics combined, may be of real value in the personal development not only of those engaged in the profession of arms, but those also engaged in governance, policy-formulation and strategy. In the final analysis, as Jonathan Fennell puts it in this publication: "it is the reflective practitioner that ultimately wins wars."



# APPLIED HISTORY: THE BRITISH ARMY AND THE STUDY OF WAR

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Much of the current debate on the place of history in society and public life has focused on the fundamental question of who writes it. This has revolved, principally, around issues of gender and race<sup>1</sup>. The fields of military history and the study of war more generally have not been immune from such discussions. Powerful contributions have been made suggesting that professional military education (PME) should best be left to the military, those with direct experience of the stresses and strains of combat, while academics have retorted that independent civilian input is of critical importance<sup>2</sup>. For those working in PME, both military and civilian educators, such introspective debates can be useful, helping to draw out the inherent biases of one's profession. They, however, only engage with a narrowly defined set of problems.

In order to grasp how history is used, and perhaps misused, by the British Army to help it enhance its contemporary understanding, inform its learning practices, and shape its organisational identity, a wider range of questions have to be asked. The first of which is why history is used in an applied fashion at all by military institutions such as the British Army. What does thinking about the past add to the Army's intellectual edge? This needs to be considered from the 'other side of the hill' as well, in terms of why historians should engage with the Army in the field of applied history. What is in it for the historical profession in terms of shaping its understanding of contemporary defence challenges, the functioning of the state and the motivations of a population at war, and how might this greater understanding of contemporary wars enhance the study of warfare in the past? There then follows a need to work out exactly how history might be applied to the study of war by the Army and historians. What resources are required, where should the points of focus be, and what should the results of such research be? Finally, it is important to think about

<sup>1</sup>See the Royal Historical Society reports *Gender Equality and Historians in UK Higher Education* (January 2015) and *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change* (October 2018).

<sup>2</sup>A. Fox and D. Morgan-Owen, 'Whose voice matters? The British Army in 2018', *Wavell Room*, 21 June 2018: [wvellroom.com/2018/06/21/whose-voice-matters-the-british-army-in-2018](http://wvellroom.com/2018/06/21/whose-voice-matters-the-british-army-in-2018) [accessed 3 December 2018]; P. Thornhill, 'To Produce Strategists, Focus on Staffing Senior Leaders', *War on the Rocks*, 20 July 2018: [warontherocks.com/2018/07/to-produce-strategists-focus-on-staffing-senior-leaders](http://warontherocks.com/2018/07/to-produce-strategists-focus-on-staffing-senior-leaders) [accessed 3 December 2018]; D. Morgan-Owen, 'Approaching a Fork in the Road: Professional Education and Military Learning', *War on the Rocks*, 25 July 2018: [warontherocks.com/2018/07/approaching-a-fork-in-the-road-professional-education-and-military-learning](http://warontherocks.com/2018/07/approaching-a-fork-in-the-road-professional-education-and-military-learning) [accessed 3 December 2018].

what applied history might actually look like in practice. This involves grappling with how, if at all, it can be differentiated from the wider discipline.

Such debate over the application of historical study to contemporary problems is not new. For the great Latin stylist and historian of early imperial Rome, Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56-117), history had a clear didactic function. It was to be used to teach Rome's leaders – of which he was one, serving both as a senator and consul – 'lessons' from the past, and by so doing help to form and strengthen their moral character to better lead the empire in the present<sup>3</sup>. In his *Annals*, which covered the period AD 14-68, from the death of Augustus to that of Nero, Tacitus made clear the moral purpose of history: it would both "commemorate virtue and condemn iniquity for ever"<sup>4</sup>. For Tacitus then, history was written not just for pleasure or to expand the mind, but to be applied, to shape the current practice and development of the Roman Empire and its political life.



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There are, obviously, many different theoretical ways to go about the study and writing of history, and that of Tacitus does not have to stand as a dominant approach. Indeed, Kim Wagner, a historian of another empire and its violent excesses, would caution against historians getting too close to practitioners. He suggests that a "parochial" or "weaponised" military history emerges from those who work closely with modern militaries and think too much about how their research might be applied to today's problems<sup>5</sup>. Yet, there is still value in considering Tacitus' position, which does powerfully remind us that history as a scholarly discipline has, for at least two millennia, possessed inherent tensions regarding its didactic and applied elements.

It is interesting to note that a large chunk of Tacitus' writing in his *Histories*, covering the period AD 69-96, is actually a narrative of warfare<sup>6</sup>. The study of the history of war thus seems to offer something particularly pertinent to

the applied historian interested in history's didactic role. In part, the fascination of historians with periods of warfare derives from the complexity of the events involved. It is during war that historical change occurs at pace and under great pressure, with peoples, states, and cultures tested to destruction. It is

<sup>3</sup>S.R.L. Roberts, 'Tacitus' Conception of the Function of History', *Greece & Rome*, Vol. 6, No. 16 (1936), 9; R. Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History of Greece and Rome* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 590-96.

<sup>4</sup>R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 520.

<sup>5</sup>K.A. Wagner, 'Seeing Like a Soldier: The Amritsar Massacre and the Politics of Military History', in M. Thomas and G. Curless (eds.), *Decolonization and Conflict: Colonial Comparisons and Legacies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 23-37.

<sup>6</sup>Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 157.



Imagine being in the headquarters of General Douglas Haig around lunchtime on 1 July 1916 as he and his staff tried to interpret the confused and contradictory reports emerging from the frontline as the British Expeditionary Force attempted to batter its way through the German defences on the Somme. Here questions of tactics (opportunities for exploitation, limits of advance, the respective roles of artillery, cavalry and infantry) collided with strategy (significant casualties as a political tool, the failure of command, the problems of alliance warfare, machine-led versus human-intensive warfare)

frequently suggested that 21st Century war, the era of supposed hybridity, is a particularly complex one<sup>7</sup>. This is an assertion that does not stand the scrutiny of even basic historical enquiry. It is worth considering just one moment of historical conflict from a little more than 100 years ago to debunk this idea of a newly complex contemporary world. Imagine being in the headquarters of General Douglas Haig around lunchtime on 1 July 1916 as he and his staff tried to interpret the confused and contradictory reports emerging from the frontline as the British Expeditionary Force attempted to batter its way through the German defences on the Somme. Here questions of tactics (opportunities for exploitation, limits of advance, the respective roles of artillery, cavalry and infantry) collided with strategy (significant casualties as a political tool, the failure of command, the problems of alliance warfare, machine-led versus human-intensive warfare). For Haig this was not a simple moment where decision-making was easy. Just because the British Army and others have performed poorly in counter-insurgency wars since 2001 does not mean that a new era of warfare has dawned and that no insights can be found in the wars of the past. To put it bluntly for the advocates of hybrid war: conventional wars of the 20th Century, and earlier, were complex too.

The complexity of war – both historic and contemporary – should not really need highlighting. It is obvious to practitioners, many of whom will have passed through myriad operational problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, and should also be to scholars trying to understand and analyse events in the past. As Clausewitz argued, the very nature of war involves the interaction of multiple forces (passion, chance, and reason), and thus different elements of a state's society, its military institutions, and political governance. Once an opponent is thrown into the mix, and similar questions are asked of the way they conduct war, then the avenues of inquiry only grow in scale. The study of war in the past and present is thus inherently a comparative discipline. Moreover, wars inevitably involve more than just what happens on and around the battlefield. They raise fundamental questions about politics, society, culture, race, gender, economics, technology, and ideas. There is an argument to be made that in order to study the history of war, these different intersecting

elements need to be brought together. This is perhaps most clearly articulated for the period 1914-45, with the era of 'total wars' requiring a 'total history'. It is, however, true of all wars; how can one understand the Malayan Emergency without considering questions relating to empire and its decline, economics, religion, race, military capability, post-colonial power structures, regional dynamics in the Cold War, and the perceived threat of global Communist revolution?

What is striking about the history of war is that it frequently engages with these questions of complexity. The now vast historiography associated with the First World War is testament to this in one particular sub-discipline of the history of war<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, it is probably the chance to grapple with the fields of military, political, cultural, economic (the poorest served of all), and social history simultaneously that attracts students to research and write on the history of conflicts such as the Great War. In this sense it stands, perhaps, in contrast to the wider historical discipline in the 21st Century, which is often stove piped into particular avenues of theoretical interpretation. David Armitage and Jo Guldi have articulated this in relation to the time frames that historians tend to work over, with PhD theses increasingly focusing on narrow periods to the exclusion of the *longue durée*<sup>9</sup>. Those academics who argue that military history is a parochial field should also consider other subsets of the historical discipline and their inherent problems. It is worth asking how one can even begin to study the history of 20th Century Europe or 19th Century empires without engaging with profoundly military historical questions. David Edgerton has for many years placed the development of Britain's military capacity at the centre of the story of the 20th Century British state. For him it was as much, if not more of, a warfare state than a welfare state<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, Kim Wagner has recently argued for exactly this broader interpretation, that military history does need to form a central part of imperial history. He

<sup>8</sup>See the bibliography compiled by the International Society for First World War Studies, a project devised and led by Franziska Heimbürger, which details nearly 16,000 publications on the conflict: [zotero.org/groups/55813/first\\_world\\_war\\_studies\\_bibliography/items/](https://zotero.org/groups/55813/first_world_war_studies_bibliography/items/) [accessed 3 December 2018].

<sup>9</sup>J. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); D. Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>For an early iteration of ideas on hybrid war see F.G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

**Flashback: A support company of the Tyneside Irish Brigade advancing from the Tara-Usna Line opposite La Boisselle on 1 July, 1916, the first day on the Somme.** Credit: IWM (Q 53)



cites the example of weapons manufacture, specifically Dum-Dum bullets, as one in which questions of racial hierarchies, colonial ideologies, and military technology intersected<sup>11</sup>. Wagner also argues that military historians must engage with broader questions raised by the diverse histories of empire written over the last 30 years.

Critiques of applied history tend to see it simply as history writing that serves a pre-determined purpose for policy makers, or in the specific case of military history as serving the whims of generals. There are, undoubtedly, cases of such applied historical practice taking place. At its best, however, applied history can offer a means of broadening debates about how history is researched, written and constructed, and about why historical enquiry is pursued by scholars. It would be naïve to think that military practitioners will not be asking profoundly historical questions as part of their jobs to try to understand the context in which they operate today. Britain's recent wars, with the Army operating among peoples who commemorate and memorialise battles such as the Boyné and Maiwand, makes all too clear that history still matters. Historians of war should not shy away from engaging with such questions, rather than leaving them to be answered by more pliable academic disciplines.

This edition of *Ares & Athena* brings together historians working in PME, those based in the university sector, and soldier scholars to try to address some of the pressing questions related to applied history and its relationship to the study of war in particular. The eight contributions fall into three areas: the why and how of applied history, examples of what applied history might look like, and the problems associated with applied history. First, Jonathan Boff focuses in on the early 20th Century Army reforms conducted by Haldane to draw out how these changes were created and implemented. These are then compared to the reforms of the inter-war years and late 1950s. All of these moments of significant change in defence offer thoughts for the modern British Army, especially in terms of the balance of labour and capital, and the value of politically and publicly articulating the need for reform. Jonathan Fennell looks at the (re-)emergence of applied history as a discipline in the 21st Century and suggests that military history is a key arena for such work. Studying military history will help to create the reflective practitioners that the British Army needs in order to find its qualitative edge over future opponents. Paul Latawski then examines the writing of official history by the British Army and state, arguing that there is a pressing need for operational military history to be engaged with today. To this end he suggests the creation of a British Army Centre of Military History to begin the process of researching and writing on the myriad operations conducted since 1945 by the Army, but that sadly lack official accounts.

There then follow three articles that give a sense of what applied history might look like and what can be gained from its study. Linda Risso looks at a moment of strategic military reform through the lens of the complex alliance politics found within NATO. The issues that are faced by NATO in 2018 go beyond simple questions of resourcing to touch on pertinent problems related to constructing a credible deterrence posture.

<sup>11</sup> K.A. Wagner, 'Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 85 (2018), 217-37.

As she demonstrates, the Harmel Report of 1967 offers interesting parallels; today's problems are not entirely unique.

The next two articles focus in on the staff ride as a site for the application of history to the intellectual and organisational development of the British Army. Anthony King offers an alternative take on the staff ride, suggesting that it is not a particularly useful tool for promoting better decision-making as the cases examined are often far too historically contingent. Instead, he argues that staff rides are of fundamental importance for affirming the professional identity of the officer corps and general staff, both internally and to external audiences. They also have an important social role in helping to form personal and professional bonds between participants, in enhancing cohesion by building and reinforcing unit mythologies, and by allowing officers to think about the moral difficulties involved in decision-making during war. In contrast, Major-General (ret'd) Mungo Melvin highlights the specific role that staff rides can play in helping Service personnel better grasp, among other things, the changing character of war, alliance dynamics, combined arms, rapid decision-making in battle, and the role of new technologies. He also gives an overview of best practice in staff riding, pointing out the areas where people can get things both right and wrong in their organisation and conduct.

The final two articles draw out some of the problems involved in applied history. Colonel Martin Todd points to the fact that modern academia is not always amenable to the needs and intellectual agenda of the military, fearing a loss of its independence, although war studies and military history as disciplines are often more willing to engage. At the same time, military institutions and personnel often shy away from the theoretical complexities of academic work. As he points out, the CHACR's force regeneration project offers a potential model for how to bring academics and practitioners together to answer research questions posed by the Army, adding much-needed context to its understanding of the contemporary operating environment. Finally, Matthew Ford argues that military history as a discipline needs to be redefined and reinvigorated in the 21st Century if it is to serve both the interests of the academic and military communities. At heart this involves understanding the fundamental differences between the two professions. PME institutions and their academics need to be aware of the dangers of parochialism and to engage fully with wider academic arguments, but at the same time Ford advocates that university academics must step up to their social responsibilities rather than hiding from the difficult debates raised by the modern military and its operations. Both sets of academics – within and outside the military – need to engage with military history in order to drive change.

The eight articles here hopefully offer a chance to think about some of the questions applied history raises in relation to the study of war and how the Army develops its intellectual agenda. They are not definitive takes, but instead help to drive the discussion on beyond simply who does applied military history, and into the arenas of why and how it is done, what it might look like, and what problems might be encountered. Of the eight, six are based on papers given at a conference on applied history at Robertson House, RMAS. This event was made possible by the generous financial support of the CHACR, the Sir Michael Howard Centre for the History of War at King's College London, and the War Studies Department at RMAS.



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# WAR AND PUBLIC FINANCE, OR HOW (NOT) TO REFORM AN ARMY

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Since at least the time of Thucydides, war has been ‘a matter not so much of arms as of money’. Even on 27 August 1918, in the middle of the climactic battle on the Western Front, with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) pushing the Germans back across the much-fought-over Somme battlefield, the British 2nd Division sent out teams to pick up and salvage anything they could as part of an immense recycling effort decades ahead of its green time. They came back to base with no fewer than 80 wagon-loads of salvage worth, they proudly recorded, £15,000. The British Army was literally scrabbling in the mud for brass shell cases. Every penny, clearly, counted. If that was true at the peak of total war, when, if ever, you would expect money to matter little, how much more must it have mattered in peacetime? This article looks at the relationship between public finance and army reform. It compares and contrasts a number of attempts to reorganise and reform the British Army, to see how important money and finance were in making the difference between success and failure.

Let’s start by looking at the Army in the aftermath of a drawn-out expeditionary war, fought thousands of miles from home, where a brief period of conventional fighting was followed by a tedious and difficult counter-insurgency campaign. A war which had not gone very well. The war was the Boer War, 1899-1902, and the first reform efforts were those of three secretaries of state: William St John Brodrick and Hugh Arnold-Forster, both Tories, and the Liberal who followed them, Richard Burdon Haldane, Secretary of State from 1906 to 1912 and widely considered one of the most successful reformers and men ever to have held the office<sup>12</sup>.

When the South African War broke out in October 1899, everyone expected the Army would easily be able to teach a few Boer farmers a lesson. The reality proved very different, with the Army getting a very bloody conventional nose during Black Week in December 1899. Even once the Boer armies had been beaten, a long and frustrating counter-insurgency campaign, which stretched the military resources of Britain and her Empire to the limit, dragged on until May 1902. There were evidently problems with the Army’s administration, kit, manpower, training, and tactics.

St John Brodrick had been appointed Secretary of State for War in November 1900 but his first reaction was not to rock the boat too dramatically while the war went on. Once peace came, however, he realised that he was on the verge of wasting a good crisis and decided to push through reform while he could still finance it using wartime levels of taxation (about



*Drawn-out affair: A 4.7-inch gun known as ‘Joe Chamberlain’ firing during the barrage of Magersfontein. The barrage was one of the biggest since Sevastopol but only served to warn the Boers of the imminence of British attack. Credit: IWM (Q82943)*

double pre-1899 levels). He proposed setting up six regional Army Corps, three of them all-regular and able to form an expeditionary force to fight wherever required overseas, with the other three, incorporating regulars and troops from a reformed militia, providing home defence and a base for Army expansion in time of need. He wanted to recruit 11,500 more soldiers and to improve their pay.

Brodrick made two fundamental mistakes. Firstly, he rushed his reforms and failed to build the necessary support for them, both in the War Office and among the county grandees, for whom the Militia constituted an important aspect of local identity and patronage networks and who were therefore suspicious of reform. Secondly, by expanding the Army and paying it more, he was arguing for spending more money at a time when the mood, both in the Treasury and the country more broadly, was in favour of austerity and finding economies to pay off the £250 million cost of the war.

With the War Office having proved incapable of reforming itself, in October 1903 the prime minister, Arthur Balfour, moved Brodrick and brought in an outsider from the Admiralty, Hugh Arnold-Forster, to implement the reforms arising from the Elgin Commission, set up to identify lessons learnt from the Boer War, and from the Esher committee formed to come up with concrete proposals for change. The chairman, Lord Esher, primarily represented the King’s interest in what the monarch tended to see very much as his Army. The famous Admiral Jackie Fisher was another influential member. Esher’s committee made three main recommendations in early 1904: 1) an Army Council along the lines of the Board of Admiralty; 2) a General Staff; 3) abolition of the post of Commander-in-Chief. These were all implemented and marked important and lasting external

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<sup>12</sup>This is one of the most closely-studied periods in the history of British defence, and I would like to acknowledge the fine scholarship of David French, John Gooch, Nicholas d’Ombraïn, Edward Spiers, Peter Grant, George Peden, Hew Strachan, David Morgan-Owen, and Chris Phillips, on whose work this article draws heavily.



interventions in the Army's governance, but Arnold-Forster was unable to push on with other reforms he had in mind, especially, again, of the Militia, for two main reasons. First, his arrogance managed to alienate almost everyone. It was, perhaps, inevitable that conservatives within the War Office would resent what looked like naval interference in their business and that Lord Roberts, hero of the Indian Mutiny, Kandahar, and South Africa, would resent losing his job as Commander-in-Chief; but Arnold-Forster also repeated Brodrick's mistake of trying to force through unpopular Militia reform. He even managed to upset Lord Esher and thus the King. Secondly, the Tory party was, from autumn 1903, tearing itself to pieces over Protectionism and Free Trade, and Balfour's government was increasingly broken-backed. The election of December 1905 put it out of its misery and resulted in a Liberal landslide.

The new Secretary of State was Richard Burdon Haldane, a barrister and philosopher who had been educated in Germany and hoped to learn from the efficiency of her army. Between 1906 and 1912 Haldane pushed through a series of major reforms. The three main strands included: 1) The establishment of a British Expeditionary Force of six infantry divisions and one cavalry division, organised on the so-called 'large' basis of four brigades and 1,000-man battalions. 2) He reorganised the auxiliary forces (Militia, Yeomanry, and Volunteers) into a Territorial Force of 14 regional divisions for home defence and a Special Reserve to form a base for Army expansion in case of need; he also set up OTCs on more or less their modern basis. 3) He moved responsibility for Army expenditure from civilian scrutineers concerned only with process to the administrative branches of the Army themselves, each operating like a large business under its own dedicated manager, many of whom incidentally were properly trained in modern business methods at the London School of Economics, with those managers fully responsible for the outcomes of that spending.

Why did Haldane succeed where Brodrick and Arnold-Forster had failed? The ideas were not radically different, after all. In fact, many had been floating around for years. There were two main reasons. First, he prepared his ground carefully, listening to experts including Douglas Haig and his Permanent Secretary (Sir Edward Ward, founder of the Army Service Corps) and disarming opposition, including from the militia backwoodsmen by compromises, charm, and mobilising royal prestige via Lord Esher. Second, his reforms saved money, by improving efficiency and by cutting the size of the Army by 16,000 men; this commanded bipartisan support. Saving money appealed to both sides of the House and, crucially, to the Treasury.

In his post-war memoirs Haldane suggested that his main motivation was to build an army capable of fighting and defeating Germany in Europe. This was hindsight. The BEF which went to France in August 1914 was not specifically designed to fight Germany, or even necessarily to operate on the continent. At no point did Haldane set a strategic objective for the BEF, much less the army overall. Indeed, no politician or official ever set such an objective between 1888 and 1914. Haldane's intention was simple: it was to save money. Right from the beginning, he insisted that any reform must result in Army Estimates below £28 million and he achieved it. As Haldane's biographer Edward Spiers put it, far from "perceiving a strategic objective and simply providing the wherewithal in men, arms and organisation to meet it,

Haldane had set a mandatory financial limit and had hoped that the existing forces, if better organised, would fulfil the strategic requirements".

The Edwardian period, therefore, demonstrates that reform depends both on how it is managed in terms of creating a coalition for change prepared to support it; and on what it seeks to achieve, with the essential element being saving money. Asking for more money, unless one faces a very real, obvious, and immediate threat, does not get anyone very far.

There's an interesting contrast here with the inter-war period. From 1919 to 1932 the UK had in place the Ten-Year Rule, explicitly ruling out major war within a decade. Throughout those years, the military continually, and correctly, complained that it lacked the resources to do all the things it was being asked to do, and the Services tore each other to pieces fighting for the crumbs. No-one was willing to listen. Eventually, in 1932, in the wake of Japanese aggression in China, the Ten-Year Rule was explicitly dropped but spending did not suddenly jump. There was at that stage no German threat, and Japan was clearly not seen as a realistic danger or adversary. Rather, defence spending flatlined at about 2.8 per cent of GDP, only turning up a little in 1935 and then climbing much more steeply after Munich in 1938. The main beneficiary, partly because the War Office remained hopelessly divided internally, was the RAF.

In other words, capacity cannot be improved just by telling a better story. It is not about the narrative. One does not get more money by vaguely muttering about capability shortfalls or ill-defined threats. Only when the threat is so very real and immediate that it's clear to a checkout clerk at Tesco's, will the cash start to flow. In any situation short of that, reform, not expansion, must be the watchword, and the experience of the Edwardian period suggests that it's crucial to a) prepare the ground and support, within the army, the military, and more broadly, very carefully, and b) to offer economies.

How to find those economies is the tough bit, of course. Promises of 'efficiency savings' are rarely believed and never delivered. But history might be able to offer help here. After the First World War, while the main priority was disarmament, where the UK was prepared to spend money was on kit, rather than manpower, substituting capital for labour, and aircraft, tanks, lorries, and so on, for riflemen, to offer more effect for less cash. This was also true of Duncan Sandys' Defence White Paper of 1957. This, like Haldane's reforms, was explicitly designed to achieve political and financial, rather than military, ends: the abolition of National Service and a reduction in defence spending from over 8 per cent to 6.5 per cent of GDP. He largely achieved those objectives by setting Service manning levels based on reasonable assumptions of recruitment, rather than commitments, and by letting kit, in the shape of nuclear weapons, including tactical ones, take more of the strain.

The best source of economy, therefore, is to surf that capital-labour continuum, switching backwards and forwards between machines and manpower as the situation demands while generating improved capacity at lower cost. That's what experience in the 20th Century, at least, suggests is necessary to mobilise the Treasury, Parliament and the public for change. That's why getting stuck on an arbitrary manpower target would remove freedom of manoeuvre and constitute a major mistake.



# APPLIED CONFLICT HISTORY AND THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Jonathan Fennell  
King's College London

In the 1960s, historians at the department of War Studies, King's College London, argued for some profound changes in the way scholars were engaging with the topic of war. Historians, it was argued, should not only study the decisions and actions of great captains and the material culture of armies, but also the political, social, and economic factors that influence the conduct and experience of military formations in battle. As Sir Michael Howard put in a seminal *Royal United Services Institution Journal* article in 1962:

*Wars are not tactical exercises writ large. They are [...] conflicts of societies, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them. The roots of victory or defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, and economic factors*<sup>13</sup>.

In the early 1990s, a series of conferences were held at Princeton, Yale, and the Naval War College in the United States to engage again with these ideas. These important fora formalised the methodological underpinnings of the 'New Military History': an 'effort to integrate the study of military institutions and their actions more closely with other kinds of history'. The study of war, it was argued, had to be more closely related to the study of society, economics, politics, and culture. The result has been a generation of innovative scholarship that has significantly deepened our understanding of war and of the relationship between war and society. Indeed, so ingrained are these approaches in the history of war today that it seems "silly", as Robert Citino has argued, "to keep calling" the New Military History as "new"<sup>14</sup>.

A quarter of a century after the formalisation of the New Military History, another step change in the way scholars study the history of conflict has emerged. War is increasingly used in an 'applied' manner, as a 'laboratory' in which to study the great challenges facing society. War, as Eric Hobsbawm has argued, "can bring into the open so much that is normally latent" and "concentrate and magnify phenomena". The clarity that paradoxically can emerge from the chaos of war can, as Indivar Kamtekar posits, provide "a flare of light" that enables us to see society's "features more clearly". As a recent Society for Military History White Paper on *The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy* has stressed:

*Examining the origins of wars informs us about human behavior [...] Analyzing the nature of war informs us about the psychology of humans [...] and the dynamics of political and social behavior*

<sup>13</sup>M. Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', *The Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 107, No. 625 (1962), 7.

<sup>14</sup>R.M. Citino, 'Military Histories Old and New: A Reinterpretation', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 112 (2007), 1070-90.



US intervention: Conferences at prestigious academic institutions, such as Princeton pictured above, set the foundations for the New Military History.

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*within nations and across populations. And studying the consequences of wars helps us [...] develop a heightened ability for comprehending the elements of political behavior that can lead to sustainable [...] social, political, and economic structures and relationships. Research in military history not only informs and enriches the discipline of history, but also informs work in a host of other fields including political science, sociology, and public policy*<sup>15</sup>.

This perspective, that wars can act as a lens on society, is complemented by an empirical reality; wars in the modern era generate an enormous amount of data. Recent studies, from across the humanities and social sciences, have taken advantage of this dynamic 'symbiosis' to provide new insights in the fields of sociology, organisational behaviour, psychology and psychiatry, innovation and technology, economics, and strategic studies<sup>16</sup>.

## Applied History

The concept of 'Applied History' is not a new one. There is a long-term tension among historians over whether history

<sup>15</sup>T. Davis Biddle and R.M. Citino, 'The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy', *A Society for Military History White Paper* (November 2014), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup>A. King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); S. Jha and S. Wilkinson, 'Does Combat Experience Foster Organisation Skill? Evidence from Ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of South Asia', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (2012), 883-907; E. Jones and S. Wessely, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2005); D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); T. Piketty (trans. A. Goldhammer), *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Belknap Press, 2014); H. Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); L. Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).



should be ‘pure’, i.e. studied for its own sake, so that we can better understand the past, or ‘applied’, i.e. studied to better understand contemporary challenges and dynamics<sup>17</sup>. Although historians such as A.J.P. Taylor, and others, have argued that history has no use whatsoever beyond helping us to understand the past, most historians would argue that it is simply inaccurate to argue that history teaches us nothing. The great Greek historians understood history in this way. In the fifth century BC, Thucydides declared that the past was an aid in the interpretation of the future<sup>18</sup>. In 2002, the History and Policy partnership was set up with similar understandings in mind<sup>19</sup>. Even more recently, Niall Ferguson and others have set up an Applied History Project at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. According to Ferguson and his team, “Applied History is the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues”. Mainstream (‘pure’) historians, they argue, “begin with an event or era and attempt to provide an account of what happened and why. Applied historians begin with a current choice or predicament and analyse the historical record to provide perspective, stimulate imagination, find clues about what is likely to happen, suggest possible interventions, and assess probable consequences<sup>20</sup>”. The goal of the Harvard team is to establish a White House Council of Historical Advisors in the clear and undisguised hope of influencing policy.

As potentially significant as these innovations might appear for policy makers and our understanding of society, it must be noted that Applied History has some of its greatest proponents in the field of military history. John A. Lynn has argued, for example, that there are three “genres” of military history: popular and academic, which together broadly fall under the category of ‘pure’ history, and ‘applied’ – typically referring to the use of military history as a tool to educate military professionals and prepare them for the challenges of contemporary conflict<sup>21</sup>. An understanding of the past, it is argued, can greatly aid the development of professional judgement, and professional judgement is central to the performance of all military institutions.

### The military and Applied History

To the military professional, arguments for the centrality of military history to curricula at staff colleges and military academies might seem a little anachronistic at a time of profound technological and conceptual change. With the ever-increasing importance of artificial intelligence, drones, and space to military affairs, there appears little room for the study of Wellington at Waterloo, attrition on the Western Front, or the struggle for Normandy in the Second World War. With the character of war changing fast, it appears that the best way to prepare for the future is to focus more on the methods and theories championed in the political sciences

<sup>17</sup>J.A. Lynn II, ‘Breaching the Walls of Academe: The Purposes, Problems, and Prospects of Military History’, *Academic Questions*, Vol. 21, No.1 (2008), 23.

<sup>18</sup>M. MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile, 2010), p. 141.

<sup>19</sup>historyandpolicy.org [accessed 3 December 2018].

<sup>20</sup>belfercenter.org/project/applied-history-project [accessed 3 December 2018].

<sup>21</sup>Lynn, ‘Breaching the Walls of Academe’, 20-22.



Arguments for the centrality of military history to curricula at staff colleges and military academies might seem a little anachronistic at a time of profound technological and conceptual change. With the ever-increasing importance of artificial intelligence, ‘drones’, and space to military affairs, there appears little room for the study of Wellington at Waterloo, attrition on the Western Front, or the struggle for Normandy in the Second World War



and the field of strategic studies.

There is undoubtedly much to learn from these disciplines. But they also have profound weaknesses when it comes to training the professional problem solver. Engaging predominantly with disciplines that put a premium on theory can leave the future decision maker vulnerable. If policy is developed based on a belief that  $x + y = z$ , and this understanding proves incorrect, it is not only individuals, but institutions and states that will fail. In the context of the field of strategic studies, ‘empiricism’, as one high-profile scholar has put it recently, ‘seems to be out of fashion’.

Theory, having been granted primacy, creates expectations of reality and so prevents the hard-headed interpretation of events, blocking rather than refracting the light shed on theory by change. The result, paradoxically, is that historians can be readier to identify change than are students of strateg[ic studies]<sup>22</sup>.

Clausewitz fully understood this dynamic. As he sought systems, ‘an explanatory theoretical framework’, that ‘would enable him to understand war as a general phenomenon’, he ‘was constantly frustrated by his own intellectual and historical

<sup>22</sup>Strachan, *Direction of War*, pp. 254-55.



rigour'. Practice, as Hew Strachan has argued, "intruded, resulting in his recognition of 'exceptions to his own rules'"<sup>23</sup>.

Students of history, thus, in many ways, stand in a unique and privileged position; by engaging with the past they learn that human behaviour is infinitely diverse, complex and contingent. "History", according to Marc Bloch, "is, in its essentials, the science of change, because by studying real events, and by bringing intelligence to bear on problems of analytical comparison, it succeeds in discovering, with ever-increasing accuracy, the parallel movements of cause and effect"<sup>24</sup>. An 'awareness of context' and a 'command of the sources' ensures that students of the history of war understand the 'proper relationship between theory and evidence' and the complex and contingent relationships between cause and effect<sup>25</sup>.

This is not to argue that military staff colleges and academies should turn their backs on political science and strategic studies, far from it. Interdisciplinary dialogues and cooperation remain essential. The study of history, even in its 'pure' form, engages with social science perspectives; to suggest that one can understand the past without understanding the range of human behaviours and motivations is entirely problematic. However, in the development of theory, it is argued that students of history, and military history in particular, might (perhaps ironically) be better placed to take a lead; they may be best placed to develop, as Jeremy Black has argued, "analytical concepts that do not treat the world as uniform"<sup>26</sup>. In the same way that some of the best academic historians use history as the underpinning of the study of strategy or innovation theory, might not military students use history, and military history, to better understand the changing character of war – with all its technological and conceptual complexities?

### The reflective practitioner

The "use of history", as Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May have argued, "can stimulate imagination. Seeing the

<sup>23</sup>Strachan, *Direction of War*, pp. 258-59.

<sup>24</sup>M. Bloch (trans. G. Hopkins), *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 117-18, quoted in Strachan, *Direction of War*, p. 254.

<sup>25</sup>J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 240.

<sup>26</sup>J. Black, 'Military History Today', *History Today*, Vol. 53, No. 11 (2003).

past can help one envision alternative futures"<sup>27</sup>. As Margaret MacMillan argues:

*History can help us to be wise; it can also suggest to us what the likely outcome of our actions might be. There are no clear blueprints to be discovered in history that can help us shape the future as we wish. Each historical event is a unique congeries of factors, people and chronology. Yet by examining the past, we can get some useful lessons about how to proceed and some warnings about what is or is not likely to happen [...] history, if it is used with care, can present us with alternatives, help us to form the questions we need to ask of the present*<sup>28</sup>.

The past might not set out the path for policy, but it does shine a light on the human condition, on the characteristics of human behaviour and on cognitive processes such as tactics, operations, strategy and innovation. History can help us identify the component parts of problems and how they interrelate. It can help us develop that most prized of all institutional assets – the reflective practitioner (individuals who constantly analyse and evaluate their decisions and actions in the search for creative and effective solutions to complex problems).

Military education is after all about the development of professional men and women so that they can think and act beyond conventional norms. Military professionals can be trained to have the knowledge and skills for expected and repetitive military processes. However, they must be educated as reflective practitioners if they are to do the fundamentals of the military profession: perform in unexpected situations and contexts; propose new perspectives, take winning decisions, and be proactive; develop the critical use of information; distinguish between multiple and often contradictory sources of information; and be creative and adaptable.

It is the reflective practitioner that ultimately wins wars. In equal measure, the quest for peace demands feats of imagination and reflection as 'concerted and impressive' as the creativeness invested in conflict<sup>29</sup>. We must all remember that no plan, theory or *a priori* philosophical perspective survives first contact with the enemy.

<sup>27</sup>R.E. Neustadt and E.R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. xv.

<sup>28</sup>MacMillan, *Uses and Abuses of History*, p. 153-54.

<sup>29</sup>C. Clark, 'This is a Reality, Not a Threat', *The New York Review of Books*, 22 November 2018.

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# THE MISSING FOUNDATION: THE BRITISH ARMY AND OFFICIAL HISTORY

Paul Latawski  
*War Studies Department, RMAS*

The British Army's use of military history to garner experience from the past and shape contemporary thinking and concepts has fallen out of favour since the middle of the 20th Century. As John Gooch has argued, "after the Second World War [...] mathematicians and social scientists shouldered aside historians as the most valued consorts of the military"<sup>30</sup>. Apart from the seduction of the alleged certainty offered by quantitative analysis of the mathematicians or the persuasive here-and-now conceptual analysis of the social scientists grounded in an ever-shifting landscape of trending intellectual fashion, the study of military history emerged from the two world wars with its main tenets if not wholly discredited then seriously questioned. The ideas that the study of military history could produce 'universal military principles' or an understanding of how great military leaders won decisive victories on the battlefield no longer had the same currency, particularly among military leadership. The study of military history became less directed on how it might shape the conduct of war than on the wider issues associated with war's impact on society<sup>31</sup>. With this broad context in mind, the aim of this essay is threefold: to revisit briefly the purpose of military history; to examine the British Army's legacy in the use of military history; and to consider how the use of military history might be revived in shaping thinking in the British Army today.

## What is the purpose of military history?

In considering the topic of the British Army's use of military history an important starting point is to begin with a first order question: what is the purpose of military history? Armies engage in among the most mentally and physically demanding of all human activities and because of this reality they can be brutally utilitarian in their approach to the intellectual endeavours of the profession of arms. In practical terms, the question can be distilled to how can military history help in shaping operational effectiveness? Professor Sir Michael Howard in addressing this question maintained that "past wars provide the only database from which the military learn how to conduct their profession: how to do it and even more important, how not to do it"<sup>32</sup>. Professor Howard also

<sup>30</sup>J. Gooch, 'Clio and Mars: The Use and Abuse of History', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1980), 21.

<sup>31</sup>S. Morillo with M.F. Pavkovic, *What is Military History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2nd edn., 2013), p. 40.

<sup>32</sup>M. Howard, 'Military History and the History of War', in W. Murray and R.H. Sinnreich (eds.), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 13.

believed that there were "good grounds for caution in 'using' military history"<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, the subject of his well-known and often-quoted lecture given at the Royal United Services Institute in 1961 was on *The Use and Abuse of Military History*. His caveats on using military history emphasised that it should be studied in "width" in order to highlight continuities and discontinuities over time; in "depth" utilising a range of primary and secondary sources to provide a sound empirical foundation; and in "context", placing military events in the broader construct of society and other non-military factors<sup>34</sup>. To the caveats offered by Howard might be added a few others. In looking at historical events, the 'truth' can

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A cursory glance at the abundant genre of historical literature devoted to regimental history indicates that reputation invariably trumps providing a frank assessment of failure

be elusive, driven by inadequate records or conflicting accounts of what transpired. Another danger is myth making. A cursory glance at the abundant genre of historical literature devoted to regimental history indicates that reputation invariably trumps providing a frank assessment of failure. Taking an event out of context and universalising its importance, imposing an order on events that did not exist at the time or using examples as evidence to justify current ideas or concepts are all ways of providing a misleading use of military history. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, the use of military history in shaping British military thinking has certainly been an important part of the British Army's past as demonstrated by the legacy of official history production.

## What is the British legacy of official history writing?

Official military history has been a major element in the British Army's use of military history since the middle of the 19th Century. As an indication of its former importance, in the early 20th Century the application of military history in the British Army can be measured by its role in military education and the training of officers<sup>35</sup>. It is not the intention here, however, to explore all of its past uses nor to give a summary of the content and themes examined in official military history writing in the British Army since the middle of the 19th Century. Rather, it is to illustrate its importance and decline by surveying the level of output in and the broad nature of official military history.

The second half of the 19th Century up to the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 was something of a golden age in British official military history writing. Consistent with wider military practice in Europe, official British military history sought to learn lessons, universal or otherwise, on the conduct

<sup>33</sup>M. Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', *The Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 107, No. 625 (1962), 6.

<sup>34</sup>Howard, 'Use and Abuse of Military History', 7-8.

<sup>35</sup>Gooch, 'Clio and Mars', 21.



*Missing chapters: The military events which unfolded in Kuwait and Iraq in 1990-91 and 2003 are not subject to official histories. Credit: Crown Copyright*

The more telling change in official military history production is the omissions in coverage of conflicts. The post-1945 internal security and counter-insurgency campaigns are without published official histories, as are the major expeditionary and conventional operations such as Suez (1956) and the two Gulf Wars (1990-91 and 2003)

of war. In the period 1854 to 1905, the output of official writing of military history can be summarised as follows:

- 24 Campaign histories
- Three studies of a conflict with a major power – Crimean War 1854-55
- 20 Studies of British ‘colonial’ campaigns
- One study of the Russo-Japanese war 1904-5<sup>36</sup>

What is striking about this period is the diversity of the official historical studies that included not only British-centric campaigns but also studies of conflicts which did not involve Britain. In some respects these works were ‘instant’ history, but often were based on direct observation of events by British officers. The scale and frequency of these studies, however, indicates that the British Army attached importance to this work.

The two world wars generated extensive official histories on the conduct of operations of the British Army and the other armed services. The First World War was covered in 19 volumes produced between 1915 and 1948. Sir James Edmonds was the guiding figure in the generation of this corpus of operational military history<sup>37</sup>. Although not without its critics, the official operational histories provided a coherent narrative and base of essential information including orders of battle, manpower and equipment statistics, directives and clear mapping<sup>38</sup>. The official history of the Second World War had multiple editors and eventually numbered approximately 30 volumes produced between 1941 and the 1970s. Compared

to the First World War official history series, the Second World War official histories were a broader survey of operations and less detailed on British Army operations. This broadening of the coverage of events is illustrated by the fact that operations on the Western Front during the First World War were the subject of 14 volumes; in comparison, British Army operations in northwest Europe during the Second World War were only covered in two volumes.

Following the Second World War, British official history writing underwent a dramatic decline with what little that was produced having a very different model than hitherto followed in the generation of official histories. Only two official histories have been produced in studies of the Korean and Falkland conflicts. With these two official histories there has been a sharp break from the dominant operational history focus of the past and a shift to a more mixed political, diplomatic, and military model where coverage of military operations has received less attention in both detail and scope. The more telling change in official military history production is the omissions in coverage of conflicts. The post-1945 internal security and counter-insurgency campaigns are without published official histories, as are the major expeditionary and conventional operations such as Suez (1956) and the two Gulf Wars (1990-91 and 2003). These omissions are the most telling indicator of the eclipse of official history writing on operational military history since the Second World War.

### Filling the official history deficit

If the study of military history is to still have a place in shaping British Army understanding of the profession of arms, then bringing official operational military history back to life will require a fresh approach. Although the template of historical examples of British operational military history contains continuity elements that can still be profitably emulated, starting anew requires addressing the key questions shaping the production of any new work. The most important of these is to articulate what is meant by operational military

<sup>36</sup>J. Luwaas, ‘The First British Official Historians’, in R. Higham (ed.), *Official Histories: Essays and Bibliographies from around the World* (Manhattan: Kansas State University Library, 1970), pp. 497-502.

<sup>37</sup>See A. Green, *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories 1915-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

<sup>38</sup>D. French, ‘Sir James Edmonds and the Official History: France and Belgium’, in B. Bond (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 69-86.



history. In the context of the body of past work, it can be defined in the following manner: 'operational military history narrates and analyses the conduct of operations across the levels of war.' Such a definition indicates that the point of operational military history is a practical one. It is to foster understanding and analysis of past military operations that is accessible, not providing a prescriptive methodology for the conduct of future operations but a stimulus to fresh thinking through past experience.

Restoring operational military history to a more significant role in shaping British Army thinking requires three important elements: a conceptual framework for writing operational military history, the raw material for research, and an organisation to produce and own the historical work. The first of these elements constitutes the intellectual foundation for renewed official operational military history. Such histories should be readable but authoritative. They should have a consistent but flexible template so that the output is not disjointed and incoherent as the result of bespoke book structures. Among the continuity elements in each operational military history book should be the inclusion of orders of battle, manpower and equipment statistics, directives and clear mapping. The published operational history output should be properly documented with footnotes/endnotes to withstand academic and military professional scrutiny and provide the starting point for further research. The focus should be on military operations in a single campaign giving an account and analysis of single Service activity but in the joint context. The research and writing of operational military history is the job for the professional historian, not a military staff function.

Producing operational military history requires the necessary research raw material. Much of this already exists in places such as the National Archives at Kew and other major and minor archival institutions across the United Kingdom. Within the British Army, however, the raw material of documentary resources has been less consistently retained with organisational changes causing fragmentation of

holdings. A good example of this problem is that of doctrine. There is no single point where a complete set of historic British Army doctrine is held. The Joint Services Command and Staff College Library, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst Library and the Historical Branch Army all have major doctrine holdings but all have incomplete doctrine collections. There is no British Army digital doctrine database comparable to the US digital doctrine holdings at the Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library in Fort Leavenworth Kansas.

The last requirement for the restoration of the production of operational military history in the British Army is the need for an organisation to produce and own the historical work. Given the ongoing thinking about and development of an 'intellectual hub' for the British Army at Sandhurst, one possible model could be to add an official history organisation to it, a British Army Centre of Military History (BACMH). Such an organisation could utilise existing resources in situ including the very good collection of the Central Library and the Department of War Studies possessing one of the largest groups of operational military historians in the United Kingdom. Another essential element in the mix is the Historical Branch Army. The structure of a BACMH should be permeable to allow the participation and collaboration of outside (university-based) military historians through fellowships and other collaborative arrangements. Apart from the production of major campaign studies a BACMH might also produce a range of shorter papers and monographs to support doctrine, force development and operational needs. While this idea for a BACMH is only to illustrate important capabilities for such an organisation, the real issue is in fact the place of operational military history in the British Army. Is the British Army willing to take the necessary steps to bring official operational military history back to life to support British Army thinking in the 21st Century?





# THE HARMEL REPORT AND NATO STRATEGY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

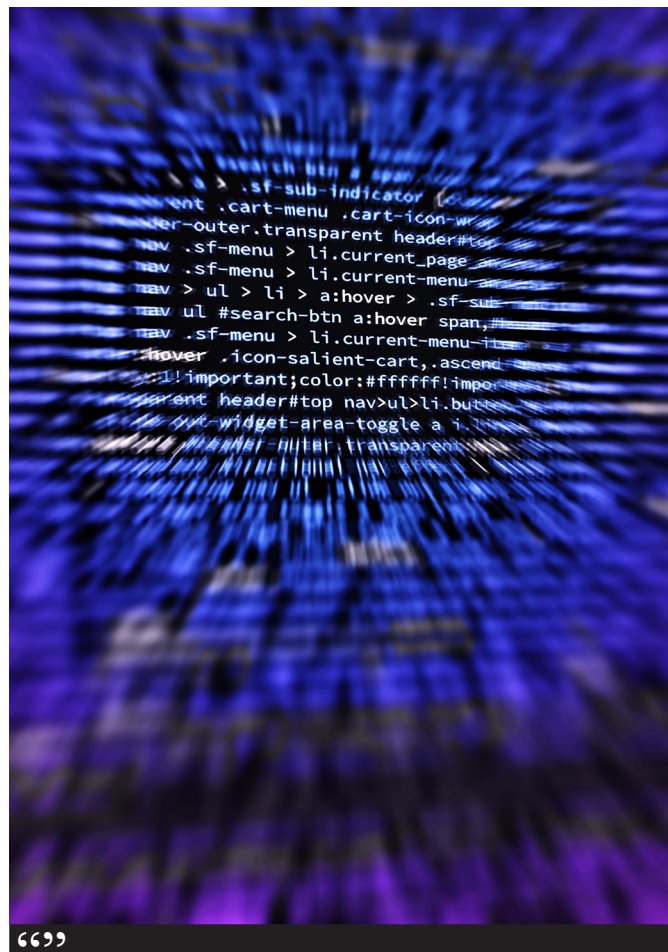
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In November 2017, the GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Report recommended that the 2018 NATO Summit launched the groundwork for a new strategic concept to be completed in time for the 70th anniversary of NATO in 2019. According to the Report, “NATO needs a forward-looking strategy that sets out how NATO will meet the challenges of an unpredictable and fast-changing world”<sup>39</sup>. The suggestion was repeated in an open letter signed by General (Ret’d) John R. Allen along with 13 eminent security experts. The letter was sent to all heads of state and government and was also widely circulated on social media a week before the summit<sup>40</sup>. Both documents saw the Harmel Report of 1967 as a blueprint to guide talks about the future Strategic Concept.

The Alliance’s current Strategic Concept was produced in 2010 and it was shaped by the experiences of the post-9/11 period and especially the NATO campaign in Afghanistan. It is obvious that the security situation has significantly changed since then. NATO is now confronted with a resurgent Russia in the East, plus multiple crises in the South, and cyberwarfare is today at the forefront of security experts’ thinking. There are obvious reasons to argue the case for a new Strategic Concept, yet a radical rethink requires strong political consensus within the Alliance. The members must have a shared assessment of the challenges they face and of the responses that they can – and want to – deploy.

NATO has traditionally based its strategic concepts on three approaches: containment, peaceful coexistence and a dual-track approach combining deterrence with diplomatic cooperation. The key distinguishing issue between these approaches is what role Moscow should have in the European security order and to what extent its interests should be reflected in NATO’s own strategic thinking<sup>41</sup>.

A containment strategy aims to deter Russia primarily through military superiority while maintaining minimal diplomatic relations. Today, this approach would entail permanent deployment of forces and the building of military infrastructure on the territory of all member states, including the East European members. NATO would deter conventional military attacks on the Baltic States,



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Poland, South-East Europe, and the Balkans. Yet, even if the Alliance decided that there is scope to do so despite the NATO-Russian Founding Act (1997), a traditional deterrent strategy would still leave open the question of how to respond to non-linear warfare, including cyberwarfare and information war. In a climate of increased tensions where there are no official channels of communication and no permanent contacts (like the one containment may lead to) there would be a high risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding<sup>42</sup>.

Peaceful coexistence foresees a relatively closer inclusion of Russia in the security architecture of Europe. In this scenario, the West sees Russia as a key interlocutor whose interests and perspectives need to be factored into NATO’s own strategic thinking and planning. NATO recognises Russia’s interests in specific regions and agrees not to interfere in what would be at

<sup>39</sup>‘One Alliance: The Future Tasks of the Adapted Alliance’, GLOBSEC, 27 November 2017: [globsec.org/publications/one-alliance-future-tasks-adapted-alliance](http://globsec.org/publications/one-alliance-future-tasks-adapted-alliance) [accessed 3 December 2018].

<sup>40</sup>‘Adapting the NATO alliance now and together’, Brookings, 9 July 2018: [brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/07/09/adapting-the-nato-alliance-now-and-together](http://brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2018/07/09/adapting-the-nato-alliance-now-and-together) [accessed 3 December 2018].

<sup>41</sup>L.S. Kaplan, *NATO divided, NATO united: The Evolution of an Alliance* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

<sup>42</sup>O. Ditych, ‘The Harm in Harmel: What the Transatlantic Alliance needs is a New Containment’, *New Perspectives*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2015), 123-27.



all effects Russia's own 'sphere'. In this scenario, countries like Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are left to fend for themselves. They would bear the political and military costs of NATO's potentially increased security.

Containment and peaceful coexistence assume that Russia cannot – or should not – be integrated into the Euro-Atlantic security order. NATO and Russia are, however, connected by a broad spectrum of common interests and relations. Moscow is also a key player in many conflicts in NATO's eastern and southern fronts. Diplomatic engagement is essential to avoid escalation and to prevent conflicts from deepening further.

It is also important not to lose sight of the fact that since the end of the Cold War, NATO has stood for the protection of human rights and for the promotion of democratic values, good governance and defence institution building across the globe. If the Alliance sacrificed these values in the name of the safety of its members, it would lose credibility and normative power. This would ultimately undermine its internal cohesion as the Alliance's solidarity is based on shared values and ideals and this is essential to maintain unity of purpose in the face of external threats. In this context, Harmel's

<sup>43</sup>The 2016 NATO Summit already used the formula 'deterrence and dialogue'. Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 9 July 2016: [nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm) [accessed 3 December 2018].

double-track approach – combining deterrence and diplomatic dialogue – could offer the blueprint to realign NATO's political strategy towards Russia without engaging in official discussions on a new Strategic Concept<sup>43</sup>.



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The Cuban Missile Crisis proved that without channels of communication and mechanisms for diplomatic dialogue between the two blocs there were real risks of nuclear escalation

It is worth remembering that the context in which the Harmel Report was produced was not entirely dissimilar from the one we are experiencing today. In the mid-1960s, external challenges and internal rifts pushed NATO to revise its strategy. The Soviet Union's nuclear capability could threaten the Alliance's superiority, thus challenging the credibility of NATO's strategy of 'massive retaliation'. The Cuban Missile Crisis proved that without channels of communication and mechanisms for diplomatic dialogue between the two blocs, there were real risks of nuclear escalation. At the time, NATO member states were also faced with emerging security challenges on their south-eastern flank, namely the crisis in Cyprus and the conflicts in the Middle East. If this was not enough, the Alliance's internal cohesion was challenged by De Gaulle's assertive foreign and defence policies and by his decision to withdraw from the integrated allied command<sup>44</sup>.

There are obvious parallels with today's security and defence challenges. NATO is

<sup>44</sup>H. Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility 1966–67* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); F. Bozo, 'Détente versus Alliance: France, the United States and the politics of the Harmel Report (1964–1968)', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1998), 343–60.







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NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg argued that, given the differences in the Alliance on how to deal with Russia, a flexible strategy of ‘more defence and more dialogue’ could become a rallying point for NATO’s own cohesion as the member states can emphasise the aspect their government and public are more comfortable with

confronted by a resurgent Russia, the migration crisis and the conflict in Syria are putting pressure on the southern front, and there are obvious internal political rifts among key allies. The Harmel Report foresaw modernisation of the Alliance’s conventional and nuclear forces. Credible deterrence required “suitable military capability to assure the balance of forces” and was to be achieved by the maintenance of “adequate military strength and political solidarity to deter aggression [...] and to defend the territory of member countries”. The second function was détente, which meant pursuing diplomatic dialogue with the Soviet Union to work “towards a more stable relationship”<sup>45</sup>. The objective of this double-track approach was the creation of

<sup>45</sup>The Future Tasks of the Alliance – The Harmel Report, 14 December 1967: [nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official\\_texts\\_26700.htm](http://nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_26700.htm) [accessed 3 December 2018].

<sup>46</sup>R. Kupiecki, ‘The Harmel Report and Lessons from NATO’s Dual-track Policy’, *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2017), 18; U. Kühn, ‘Deter and Engage: Making the Case for Harmel 2.0 as NATO’s New Strategy’, *New Perspectives: Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2015), 127–57.

<sup>47</sup>The importance of this sequencing was clear during the debate on NATO’s ‘dual-track decision’ in 1979 when NATO modernised its nuclear arsenal and its delivery systems and then it engaged in disarmament talks that eventually led to the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). S. Pifer, A. T. Bohlen, W. F. Burns, and J. Woodworth, ‘The Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces: History and Lessons Learned’, *Brookings Report*, 6 December 2012.

a sustainable peace based on deterrence, security guarantees and diplomatic cooperation<sup>46</sup>.

While it is well known that the Harmel Report suggested that deterrence and détente should go hand-in-hand, it is often forgotten that the report envisaged clear sequencing: credible deterrence based on strong defence was the precondition for the stabilisation of relations with the Soviet Union and as a basis from which to launch disarmament talks. First, the Alliance had to achieve credible deterrence through military modernisation and higher investment and then it could engage with Moscow. Disarmament talks could only take place from a position of strength<sup>47</sup>.

Today, NATO’s deterrence concept must be adapted to a more complex security environment. Defence and security are no longer dependent on military responses alone and cyber and information warfare are important new tools<sup>48</sup>. NATO must become a credible military actor. It must also strengthen the resilience of its members and their societies while at the same time continuing to stabilise the periphery and fighting the roots of terrorism globally<sup>49</sup>. This means that it is not a simple matter of increasing the defence budget of the member states, as much of the reporting on the recent NATO Summit seemed to suggest. What is necessary is a comprehensive approach to security, smart use of resources, and strong political cohesion among the members.

In a speech in April 2016, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg argued that, given the differences in the Alliance on how to deal with Russia, a flexible strategy of “more defence and more dialogue” could become a rallying point for NATO’s own cohesion, as the member states can emphasise the aspect their government and public are more comfortable with<sup>50</sup>. The revitalisation of dialogue with Russia consequently presupposes not only credible deterrence measures, but also clearly defined basic principles and values to which all members of the Alliance subscribe. Traditionally, these have been international cooperation, multilateralism, democracy, human rights; these values are currently under attack from all sides and the internal cohesion of the Alliance is exposed<sup>51</sup>. For these reasons, while it is clear that there is indeed an obvious argument in favour of a new Strategic Concept, this can only be achieved once the political cohesion of the Alliance and its military strength can sustain the debate that will surround it.

<sup>48</sup>U. Hartmann, ‘The Evolution of the Hybrid Threat, and Resilience as a Countermeasure’, *Research Paper No. 139, NATO Defence College, September 2017*, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup>German Ministry of Defence, *Whitebook for the Security Policy and Future of the German Armed Forces* (Berlin: Bonifatius, 2016), p. 32; S.A. Johnson, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2016).

<sup>50</sup>J. Stoltenberg, ‘NATO-Russia Relations: Squaring the Circle’, *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly*, 1 April 2016; A. Scheffler Corvaja, ‘Beyond Deterrence: NATO’s Agenda after Warsaw’, *Research Report No. 224, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, October 2016, p. 16.

<sup>51</sup>J.P. Kaufman, ‘The US perspective on NATO under Trump: Lessons of the Past and Prospects for the Future’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (2017), 251–66. The Charter of Paris’ normative acquis of sovereignty, territorial integrity and free selection of alliances is not negotiable for NATO members; ‘1990 Charter of Paris for a new Europe’, *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe: osce.org/de/mc/39518.htm* [accessed 18 October 2017].



# THE STAFF RIDE: A SCEPTICAL ASSESSMENT

*Anthony King*  
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The staff ride has now become established as a central practice in the British Army's education and training curricula. All the courses at the Joint Services Command and Staff College involve elaborate staff rides and divisions, brigades, and battalions organise their own staff rides on an independent basis. Indeed, the British Army has just completed the final staff ride of Operation REFLECT, its commemoration of the First World War.

Among the Armed Forces and, especially, in the Army, few doubt the utility of staff rides. More particularly, most Service personnel have a very clear concept of their function. The Armed Forces are almost unique as a profession. They spend most of their time training for its vocation, rather than being actively engaged in it. Wars, especially inter-state wars, have tended to be mercifully infrequent and, consequently, the Armed Forces often have little first-hand, practical experience of warfare. Unlike surgeons, who graduate up to the level of head clinician having watched their superiors perform numerous procedures, generals often have to conduct operations with no prior practice.

At the lower level, this can be compensated through realistic, live-fire training but for commanders, especially flag officers who are likely to have to command in war at a level which they have never experienced before, it is a major problem which even the best command post exercise cannot replicate. The staff ride is seen as an indispensable means of equipping future commanders with vicarious experience of command across a variety of historical cases. Staff rides allow commanders to expand their experience at low cost. On these rides, future generals are able to develop a series of modules or recognition pattern models which they might be able to apply in reality. Moreover, the staff ride helps commanders to overcome the specific problems they will face on future operations.

The argument is plausible; certainly, it has been almost ubiquitously accepted in the Army today. The question is whether it is true: do staff rides really increase the cognitive capacity of future commanders? Do they improve precise decision-making in reality? This article offers a sceptical assessment of the staff ride. It questions whether staff rides have to possess the immediate practical utility imputed to them. However, while the purely cognitive benefits of the staff ride may be in doubt, staff rides are not worthless. Rather, they serve a primarily social function, generating cohesion and unity. In short, rather than contributing to the conceptual component as they are intended, their main benefit is to reinforce the moral component of fighting power.

## **The peculiarity of staff rides**

If staff rides were indispensable to modern generalship and the conceptual component could not be delivered without



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them, their practice should be universal. All militaries should employ them. Strikingly, staff rides are by no means universal across militaries. Many armed forces have not practised them, even though they have subsequently been hugely successful.

Cleansed of his Nazi associations, Erwin Rommel has become one of the most celebrated generals of the 20th Century. His performance in the Battle of France and North Africa has been widely praised. He is seen as a highly-competent commander. Yet, he was not staff trained. There is no evidence in his memoirs that he gave much thought to military history. Certainly, he used his own experience from the First World War as a small-unit infantry commander, but there is little evidence of wider erudition. He was perfectly capable of formation-level command without the benefit of staff rides.

Similarly, the Israeli Defense Forces have been a notably un-intellectual organisation. Indeed, the IDF has disparaged learning and history, preferring practice and experience. It innovated in ad-hoc ways, facilitated by close personal bonds between commanders. In 1973, in the face of the Egyptian attack its solutions were not drawn from history. Indeed, Avraham Adan (GOC 162nd Armoured Division) explicitly recorded that he was entirely untrained and unprepared for the situation which confronted him: "This is not how I had imaged the division moving into battle; hastily and not in full complement. But there was no alternative; we had to take the initiative from the Egyptians". Yet, he responded very effectively. He did not require staff rides to equip him conceptually.

It is not difficult to understand why many forces have performed perfectly well without staff rides. Staff rides are based on historical case studies; they try to identify how and

why commanders made decisions at various points, and are deeply interesting as such. However, each case study involved unique and unrepeatably situations. Generals in the past made decisions in quite unreplicable predicaments. Of course, it might be argued that the general pattern of war is often predictable and consequently, learning about broadly analogous battles in the past can inform future decision. Yet, it is widely known in the Armed Forces that success or failure rests in the details. Effective command involves the identification of the critical tasks and ensuring their execution. Any amateur can see the broad outlines of a campaign. Consequently, it is highly questionable whether staff rides can produce command modules of sufficient detail that they can be applied to future cases. Of course, no matter how many staff rides future commanders attend, it is entirely conceivable that they will be presented with a genuinely novel situation. In either case, the conceptual utility of the staff ride becomes very doubtful. Staff rides just do not seem to be able to represent decision-making at a large enough scale to rehearse the actual decisions a commander will have to make on any future operation. If the conceptual benefit of staff rides is in doubt, the question, then, is what might be the real benefit of the staff ride?

### Professional status

It is useful here to look at the origin of the staff ride. Wargames are very old; they were well established by the 18th Century. Staff rides are a more recent invention. They were instituted by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder after he was appointed Chief of the Prussian General Staff in 1857. However, von Moltke's staff rides were quite different from today's historical re-enactments. They were effective TEWTs, in preparation for the Wars

of German Unification. They were not about the past but about future operations.

However, even though von Moltke's staff rides had an immediate conceptual purpose which the current ones do not, there were significant status dimensions to the staff ride. After the disgrace of the Napoleonic Wars, the Prussian General Staff needed to reassert its status in Prussian and then German society. Scharnhorst re-established the *Kriegsakademie* in 1820 and with Clausewitz attempted to reassert the professional credibility of the officer corps. In this context, the staff ride was not just an act of professional education; it was a public display of their political and professional significance. It is notable that, writing in the early 20th Century, Max Weber, the famous German sociologist, recorded that the Junker culture of the Prussian military elite impressed itself across the whole of German society.



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A similar process of status assertion was evident in the US Army after Vietnam. The US Army suffered a catastrophic collapse in Vietnam. Not only did it lose the military campaign, but the force disintegrated into indiscipline, atrocity, drug abuse, and minor mutiny. In addition, the performance of the officer corps, apparently more interested in personal promotion and career progression than care of the soldiers, was subjected to intense criticism. The United States Army Training and Doctrine Command reintroduced the modern staff ride in this context. Certainly, the ostensible purpose was professional and intellectual, but the staff ride was also intended to reassert the professional legitimacy of the US officer corps, not just within the army, but with other professional groups. The staff ride, then, seems to serve not just or even so much a conceptual function



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but rather a status function. It affirms the credibility and legitimacy of the officer corps as a professional group.

### **Cohesion**

In addition to an external function of signalling the professional status of the officer corps, the staff ride has an evident internal function: it fosters social cohesion. If staff rides were genuinely about the conceptual component, it might be expected that they would involve analysis of current operational problems to prepare officers for particular circumstances in the future which they are likely to face. They do not. It is notable that British Army staff rides are explicitly not TEWTs. They do not look at contemporary problems directly but explore operations and actions from the past; they are connected with the present only tangentially. Famous and important campaigns, often related to the history of a particular division or regiment, are selected not because they are apposite examples for the present, but because they are seen as especially poignant or meaningful.

The format and content of British Army staff rides suggests that they serve a moral function. In this context, the aim of the staff ride is not so much to train future commanders in the specifics of decision-making and provide a safe environment where they can rehearse and imagine it, but to unite the Army and the officer corps. In particular, the staff ride provides an entertaining and evocative social forum in which officers can develop personal-professional relations. In short, the staff ride is not a pedagogical event but a social one. It is by no means irrelevant or worthless as such. However, its prime purpose is different to its stated one.

The social purpose of the staff ride is very obvious at the Joint Services Command and Staff College. Take the example of the Higher Command and Staff Course (HCSC) staff ride. This ride starts in Normandy and involves a tour of northern France with a series of stands. It is certainly an invigorating

experience. However, one of the explicitly acknowledged purposes of HCSC as a whole, and the staff ride in particular, is to facilitate the formation of a joint, professional body of senior officers. Certainly, from a purely pedagogical point of view, there is little on the HCSC staff ride that could not be done in a room at Shrivenham with maps, Google Earth and the correct information technology. Indeed, it might be better supported virtually; it would certainly be cheaper. However, an event in the mundane classrooms of Shrivenham could not generate the effervescence of a journey across the memorable landscapes of Normandy and Champagne. It would inspire little enthusiasm. As such, a classroom-based staff ride would fail. A fundamental purpose of the staff ride is social, therefore. It is designed to unify and to unite, creating personal bonds between officers.

At the same time, the staff ride serves a second unifying function at the corporate level. It is noticeable that the selection of campaigns in the British Army is very limited, normally to what is familiar. Sometimes the Napoleonic Wars feature, but typically from staff rides focus on the classic period of 20th-Century warfare, the First and Second World Wars in particular. Usually, they offer a very condensed, simplified – even simplistic – history of a battle or campaign. The aim is not to waken critical faculties – or to challenge – so much as to affirm the history of the British Army and its constituent divisions and regiments. Often, the staff ride is a means of creating an invented history, focusing primarily on the shared sacrifice of prior battles. This is vitally important in the armed forces. Cohesion and loyalty is paramount. Consequently, regiments and divisions have to be invested with a deep, sacred significance for their members; why else would they risk their lives for them? The staff ride helps here by recording the past glories of the British Army and generating collective memories among serving personnel. However, this is a long way from helping a general make a decision in the 21st Century. At this point, staff rides are not fulfilling their ostensible conceptual function.

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## Moral support

I have argued that staff rides have limited utility in training commanders to make decisions intellectually. This does not mean that they have no role in helping commanders make decisions today. While it seems unlikely that a staff ride would be directly applicable to the decisions a general has to make on current operations, it is possible that staff rides may help a command morally. The moral difficulty of decision-making is often overlooked but it is very significant. Commanders have to make decisions which are likely to result in the deaths of some of their soldiers, failure and defeat. The stakes are high and, consequently, it requires great fortitude to make command decisions. Indeed, it is difficult for those who have not held a high command appointment to imagine the almost insupportable pressure it exerts on the incumbent. Staff rides may help here. While they may not help a commander to rehearse a particular decision, they may fortify a general to make decisions in general.

Major General Roy Urquhart, commander of 1st Airborne Division, on Operation MARKET GARDEN, provides a potential example here. Following the disaster of that operation, Urquhart finally decided to withdraw what remained of his division across the Rhine on 25-26 September 1944, in Operation BERLIN. It was a very difficult task with huge risks. In the event, 2,400 men of the division were evacuated. It was the only successful action in the whole sorry escapade. In planning Operation BERLIN, Urquhart modelled the action on the evacuation from Gallipoli which he had studied as part of his staff course at Camberley.

There were some evident parallels between the Gallipoli evacuation and Operation BERLIN. Both were amphibious withdrawals of a depleted and surrounded force. At Arnhem, Urquhart employed some techniques he had read about: he thinned out the perimeter, maintained radio traffic, and continued to discharge weapons. Maybe Gallipoli helped him cognitively to conceive and design this operation. Yet, if Urquhart had not studied Gallipoli would he not have been able to execute this operation? Without Gallipoli, might he never have thought of it? It seems unlikely; he had little other choice and the measures he took were relatively obvious, though he ensured their excellent execution.

However, his knowledge of Gallipoli does seem to have helped him morally. Up to October 1943, Urquhart had been Major General Douglas Wimberley's GSO1 at 51st Highland Division. Then, he briefly commanded a brigade group in Sicily and Italy but was not a brigadier and did not really have brigade experience. He had no airborne experience and suffered airsickness on the flight over to the Netherlands. He found himself in a totally alien environment. He then spent two days in a loft in 14 Zwarteweg during 17-19 September. He lost complete control of his division, and finally had to evacuate a shattered force. Every single thing that could have gone wrong, did go wrong.

The pressure on Urquhart on 24 September when it was clear he had to evacuate his force is almost unimaginable. It would seem plausible to claim that he required some moral support in this highly risky operation. He required some moral reinforcement. Here Gallipoli seems to have been relevant. Despite all its disasters, the Gallipoli operation had



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been successful. So, despite all the omens, this one might be too. Gallipoli did not so much provide Urquhart with a pattern recognition model, but rather with a moral parable. Even during a disastrous operation, an evacuation could be successful.

It might be possible to extend the point. The historical cases used in staff rides are not really historical counter-images of likely contemporary operational problems. They cannot prepare for the details of decision-making in any future instance. Every operation is unique. However, they give commanders the moral strength to make fatal decisions in a future environment of uncertainty. Staff rides empower commanders to accept the responsibility of command.

## Conclusion

This article does not dismiss staff rides as a waste of time and money. It accepts that some staff rides might be able to anticipate future decision-making, actively assisting commanders in their executive duties. However, more often staff rides serve a social and moral purpose. Their function is primarily social. They generate military cohesion by generating and vivifying collective memories. They unify the officer corps and create personal bonds between them, often across corps and services. Finally, they fortify commanders to make portentous decisions in the future, knowing that their predecessors have experienced the same predicament.



# THE VALUE OF MILITARY HISTORY: STAFF RIDES AND THE BRITISH ARMY

Major General (ret'd) Mungo Melvin CB OBE  
CHACR

*“The practical value of history is to throw the film of the past through the material projector of the present on to the screen of the future.”*  
– B.H. Liddell Hart, *Thoughts on War* (1944)

This essay seeks to set out some ‘best practice’ in the planning and conduct of staff rides, based on more than two-and-a-half decades of professional experience in this field. It also provides a timely opportunity to update previously published (2005) advice on the matter, incorporating lessons identified over four major Army-level training events in 2008, 2014, 2016 and 2018<sup>52</sup>. The latter three represented the Operation REFLECT series of international staff rides held on the Western Front of the First World War<sup>53</sup>.

## Historical background

The staff ride has long featured in British military training, going back to the last decade of the 19th Century. Douglas Haig, for example, wrote in 1907:

*“Certainly a knowledge of military history is all-important to an officer. In studying it we see the great masters at work. We learn from their experience and become acquainted with the difficulties to be encountered in applying principles. But such work contributes little to our powers of decision. On the other hand, ‘War Games’ and ‘Staff Rides’ should be framed chiefly with the latter object.”*<sup>54</sup>

On a staff ride, developing powers of decision – a fundamental attribute of any leader at whatever level of command – can be enhanced through associated Tactical Exercises Without Troops (TEWTs)<sup>55</sup>. These training serials incorporate a contemporary scenario with terrain common to historical consideration. Similar to staff rides, TEWTs enjoy a

<sup>52</sup>Brigadier R.A.M.S. Melvin OBE, ‘Contemporary Battlefield Tours and Staff Rides: A Military Practitioner’s View’, *Defence Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2005), 59–80.

<sup>53</sup>The present author was Deputy Exercise Director of the Army Staff Ride (ASR) 2008 in Germany, revisiting the Cold War, and principal historical advisor and senior mentor for ASRs 2014, 2016, and 2018. For an account of ASR 2008, see Major-General Mungo Melvin, ‘Exercise UNITED SHIELD 2008: Revisiting Military Strategy for the Twenty-First Century’, *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 154, No. 3 (2009), 36–43.

<sup>54</sup>Major-General Douglas Haig, *Cavalry Studies: Strategic and Tactical* (London: Hugh Rees, 1907), p. 19.

<sup>55</sup>A TEWT is conducted on a piece of selected terrain with commanders and staffs, but without soldiers. It allows a commander to train both staff members and subordinate leaders. It enables participants to analyse, plan, and present how they would conduct an operation within a given scenario on the terrain – thereby developing their tactical understanding and associated powers of decision.

long tradition. In 1938, for instance, Lieutenant Colonel W.E. Maitland-Dougall contributed an article to the *Royal United Services Institution Journal* praising their utility: “Always valuable, they are now of supreme importance, for they are [now] the chief means for teaching future leaders in the art of war”, noting that “the Great War is receding into the dim past”<sup>56</sup>. Although TEWTs may have earned a bad name for many in the British Army today (with recollections of bleak winter days spent on Salisbury Plain or in Germany), when focused on rapid-fire ‘decision in battle’ problems they can provide a rewarding and fun learning experience. That was certainly one of the striking aspects of Army Staff Ride 2018.

## Scope

The staff ride, usually run at formation level (brigade and above), represents an advanced if not ‘senior’ form of battlefield study, which makes considerably more demands on the training audience and organisers alike than a civilian or military battlefield tour, typically run at unit level. Whereas the latter can inform the training audience with relatively little prior preparation, the former engages it more comprehensively. It does so through detailed initial study and proactive engagement when on the ground at a series of stands, involving structured presentation, questions and discussion, followed by a rigorous after-action review (AAR) and an associated exploitation process.

## Aim and objectives

Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted. Equally, the initial effort spent on identifying and refining the overarching aim and supporting objectives is necessary to ensure that the intent and themes of a staff ride are clear to all involved, whether organisers, historians, directing staff (DS) or the training audience. An appropriate campaign, major operation or battle should then be determined, followed by the selection of stands and the formulation of questions. This latter process is often iterative with compromises having to be made over stands in the light of what is administratively possible. Alternatively, where a particular campaign is mandated for any particular reason such as an important anniversary (as was the case on the ASR16 staff ride to the Somme battlefield of 1916), a realistic set of objectives may be derived within Army or defence requirements for commemoration and learning.

## Organisation

Any military headquarters or external organisation

<sup>56</sup>Lieutenant-Colonel W.E. Maitland-Dougall, DSO MC, ‘The Preparation of Tactical Exercises Without Troops’, *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, Vol. 83 (1938)

responsible for planning and running a battlefield study of any type requires the appropriate authority, capacity and not least expertise. While it may be tempting to hire a civilian company to 'deliver' such training, particular care must be taken to ensure that the proposed contractor employs suitably qualified personnel. Although an experienced battlefield guide may prove ideal for a unit study focusing, for example, on the realities of war, the same individual would not necessarily be able to provide historical, let alone contemporary, analysis of operational-level manoeuvre.

The basic building block of a staff ride is the syndicate, normally of 10-12 people with a range of backgrounds and expertise, led by a member of the DS. Ideally, a staff ride requires a balanced mix of civilian battlefield historians and military DS, together with a senior mentor, perhaps a 'soldier scholar', who can bridge both disciplines. This experienced individual not only chairs plenary discussions when syndicates come together to compare and contrast views, but also acts as a catalyst for drawing out appropriate lessons for today.

Never to be forgotten, however, are the potentially heavy demands made on real life support (RLS) in terms of stand support, accommodation, feeding, and transport. For a major staff ride such as those run during the 'world-class' Operation REFLECT series, a rule of thumb is that every

individual within the training audience might require an equivalent in the RLS.

### **Planning and preparation: Research, reconnaissance and rehearsal**

As in any training activity, the key to success of a staff ride is thorough planning and preparation, including research, reconnaissance, and rehearsal. For a major Army-level staff ride, in addition to one or more periods of detailed reconnaissance, consideration should be given to running a complete rehearsal exercise, embracing as many of the battlefield historians and military DS designated for the main event as possible. For smaller-scale activities, however, ambitions (and costs) need to be tempered. Experience shows that brigade- or divisional-level staff rides can be successfully conducted on the basis of a detailed reconnaissance involving the exercise project officer and a lead historian. Wherever possible, exercise directors and senior mentors should also have seen the ground, and developed and discussed the question set, beforehand.

### **Documentation**

A vitally important part of the preparation phase of any staff ride is the production of the exercise documentation. This should comprise: a Reader, a 'pocket' Reference and Study Guide, together with suitable mapping. Whereas the Reader contains the historical detail and any background information on structures, arms and equipment, the Study Guide includes a detailed programme of events and lists the questions to be asked at each stand. Wherever possible, maps in either the Reader or Study Guide should be complemented by larger format versions displayed at the appropriate stands. This approach facilitates the understanding of the terrain briefing and subsequent presentation and discussion periods.



*Bringing history to life: As part of Op REFLECT, HQ Support Command ran a shoot using the Lee Enfield .303 rifle with the aim of giving soldiers a practical understanding of the challenge faced by their First World War forebears  
Credit: Graeme Main, Soldier Magazine, Crown Copyright*



## Method

Staff rides and TEWTs share certain characteristics and requirements. Both need carefully selected stands at which the terrain is described, and then either the historical episode under consideration or a tactical vignette is presented. For a staff ride, the following standard sequence of events and responsibilities are recommended:

- **Terrain orientation – Geo Staff or a member of the DS. The preferred military approach (often surprisingly badly done) is to pick out a number of key reference points that facilitate the subsequent narration and discussion using the fire direction method of ‘DIRECTION-DISTANCE-DESCRIPTION-DETAIL’. This presentation should be conducted in an authoritative, cadenced, and succinct manner. It requires practise.**
- Historical description (narrative and brief analysis) – Historian(s). Experienced battlefield historians not only educate but can also entertain, blending suitable narrative with amusing anecdote and compelling analysis. Those working in a military environment such as the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst or the Defence Academy are particularly valuable, not least younger scholars with fresh research interests. In addition, retired soldier scholars may add some further spice to the mix.
- **Direction to the training audience – Exercise Director or Chief of Staff. A member of the chain of command should normally give this important step of confirmatory direction to the training audience. On occasion, a Senior Mentor may need to step in.**
- Discussion period(s) – representing the LEARNING MAIN EFFORT!
  - Syndicate, chaired by military DS.
  - Plenary, chaired by a Senior Mentor.
- **Sum Up – Exercise Director or a Senior Mentor.**
- Exceptionally, any essential Administration – RLS Staff.

This standard approach should not be followed slavishly. Certain stands may not require both syndicate and plenary discussions. An Exercise Director may wish to confine himself/herself to offering remarks only once a day, perhaps at the final stand. Not all staff rides need Senior Mentors, but if present, they should also take an active part in the planning and exploitation stages.

A further enhancement for a top-class staff ride is providing ‘Living History’ serials to deepen the interest and learning experience of the participants. These can range from static re-enactors exhibiting arms and personal kit to dynamic displays of armoured vehicles, obstacle-crossing engineer equipment, and aircraft. ASR18 showed how well this could be done to good effect.

Staff ride questions and TEWT problems need very careful consideration. They can be posed with three basic educational and training requirements in mind: first, to confirm existing military knowledge (e.g. doctrine); second,



*Tour guide: Maj (ret'd) Mike Peters guides a group from Army Manning around Turkey's Dardanelles Peninsula, helping to bring to life and reflect on the Gallipoli Campaign*  
Credit: Graeme Main, Soldier Magazine, Crown Copyright

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Experienced battlefield historians not only educate but can also entertain, blending suitable narrative with amusing anecdote and compelling analysis

to explore new ways of doing existing things (e.g. refreshing tactics, techniques and procedures); third, to provoke entirely innovative thinking without any preconceived solutions in mind. Experience shows that a good staff ride encompasses questions of all three types. A common error, however, is to include questions that are best answered in a command and staff college syndicate room. Remember, both staff rides and TEWTs must make good use of the ground – relatively easy to achieve at unit level, but increasingly challenging the higher the level of command under consideration. In this case, a series of stands may be required to demonstrate the effects of both physical and human terrain in a comprehensive manner.

## Time and Space

The biggest enemy of any ambitious staff ride is the interrelated pressure of time and space. It is tempting to

cram in either too many stands or too much travel within a day, or, at worst, a combination of both. Bearing in mind that each stand can take up to two hours, allowing at least half an hour each for syndicate and plenary discussions, and not forgetting the time taken to get on and off coaches, feeding and ‘comfort breaks’, then it is usually impracticable to attempt to run more than three stands in any one day. In addition to the limitations of daylight during the winter months, all but the keenest and most resilient staff ride participants will reach a level of mental if not physical saturation – representing a form of staff ride culmination. Historical inputs should be kept to 10-15 minutes when possible. While an exceptionally good speaker can hold an audience for up to 20 minutes, beyond that period there are rapidly diminishing returns of attention and comprehension. Overall, most staff rides can achieve their objectives within a working week, depending on the amount of travel required.

### Exploitation

Despite the best efforts of the organisers, some very experienced, the AAR and exploitation process has proved in the past challenging to conclude successfully. It is difficult to convert observations made on the battlefield into practical recommendations and achievable actions – particularly if additional resources are required when introducing new organisations and equipment. Nonetheless, it should often be possible to adjust doctrine and training in the light of staff ride findings. Yet rarely will one staff ride provide sufficient rationale for change. Therefore it is necessary to grow a body of evidence from a number of training events. This approach calls for the systematic recording of lessons identified and a regular and rigorous process for reviewing them. A lesson cannot be regarded as ‘learnt’ until an appropriate action can be shown to have taken effect. In this regard exploitation is as important as reconnaissance; neglecting the former may nullify much of the value of the latter.

### Benefits

Staff rides offer the following benefits:

- **As with all battlefield studies, a proximate awareness of the enduring nature (friction, chance, courage etc.) and the evolving character of war, driven by strategic context, operational methods, and new tactics and technologies.**
- Enhanced professional military understanding of the challenges of combined arms and joint operations, and of command.
- **When combined with TEWTs, an opportunity to practise rapid ‘decision in battle’, a much under-emphasised aspect of current Army doctrine and training.**
- In many cases, improved multinational understanding and co-operation.

### ● A valuable stimulus for warfare and force development.

### Challenges

A successful staff ride requires a great deal of effort throughout, in planning, execution, and exploitation. The best ones, as in all other types of training, are command-led. Simply but brutally said, a commander who takes little interest in his/her staff ride until arriving at the first stand is probably unsuitable for his/her post. There are many organisational challenges to be overcome, including:

- **Negotiating bureaucratic obstacles, not least in advancing business cases and obtaining the necessary funding.**
- Avoiding the alluring short cuts in planning, preparation, and conduct such as buying in inexperienced commercial providers (noting that some may provide just what is required for a unit battlefield study).
- **Obtaining, where necessary, local host nation support, whether civilian or military.**
- Adapting to the vagaries of weather and moods/needs of the training audience.

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In addition to the limitations of daylight during the winter months, all but the keenest and most resilient staff ride participants will reach a level of mental if not physical saturation

- **Maintaining focus on the desired learning outcomes throughout.**
- Keeping roughly to time!

### Conclusion

A staff ride represents not only a proven method of experiential learning (individuals thinking for themselves, and then presenting their solutions), but also one of experimental inquiry (such as for warfare development on behalf of the Army as an institution). In addition, coalition and alliance cohesion can be promoted through joint and international participation, which fosters both individual and institutional links across services and nations. Well constructed and executed, a staff ride, often with one or more TEWTs run in tandem, can generate a significantly worthwhile training event of enduring value. Hence it should form part of every formation-level training programme.

Finally, no one has a monopoly of wisdom on this subject. The present author wishes to acknowledge the enormous amount he has learned from others, not least from the ‘greats’, such as the late Professor Richard Holmes. But typically, when mentoring, one regularly comes across an individual or group that makes a really good, unexpected, or inspirational point which provokes a most valuable follow-up discussion and/or observation. Therefore all are urged to speak up on a staff ride without fear or favour: the more that participate, the better the training event. Thus it is a team effort par excellence. Some favourable weather and the injection of good humour will put the icing on the cake, wherever the wind blows.



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# APPLIED HISTORY: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN GOWN AND GREEN

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*Colonel Martin Todd*

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Many academic disciplines have a conflicted relationship with the business of government and particularly that which relates to the use of military force. As a particular example, the American Anthropological Association identified serious professional, if not ethical, issues with its members who joined TRADOC's Human Terrain System in Afghanistan<sup>57</sup>. Meanwhile, political and social scientists, both in the US and the UK, regularly debate whether they have any public duty beyond the bounds of their profession, let alone to serve directly the government of the day and its executive branches. One lecturer in International Relations at Kansas University has described the closer interaction of academic institutions with practitioners as 'selling out' their 'vocational impulse'. Evidently, he felt that helping to run a joint masters programme at the US Army's War College at Fort Leavenworth, thereby 'earning a paycheck from the US government', had compromised his professional independence<sup>58</sup>.

Historians have, as a rule, been less reticent about associating with the military, with a litany of distinguished names having graced the academic staffs of military academies and staff colleges around the world; albeit, the field of 'war

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<sup>57</sup>See M.C. Forte, 'The Human Terrain System and Anthropology: A Review of Ongoing Public Debates', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 113 (2011), 149-53.

<sup>58</sup>B.J. Steele, 'The Bridges That Can't Be Burned, or Why We All Sell Out Eventually', in 'Forum: "A Bridge Too Far": On The Impact Of Worldly Relevance On International Relations', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 19 (2017), 695-99.

studies', in which such association predominates, is widely regarded as a narrow and remote backwater to the historical mainstream. However, many, if not most, would share another concern over the practical application of scholarship in the policy field with their more scientific cousins, that of

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deep scepticism over the ability of past events to instruct future policy, much less predict future events. Even those academics who maintain a broadly historicist approach are quick to point out that most events, particularly ones that are closely contested, are highly contingent (i.e. subject to short-term events and chance), however much they may also be rooted in long-term historical trends. Hence, any comparison between a past age and our present (or future) is fraught with danger. As Clausewitz reminds us, war has a nature that is unchanging (the same might be claimed for aspects of national political culture), so we will find examples of congruity and continuity that resonate persuasively with our own time. However, he also notes that war has a changing character, which will create incongruity and discontinuity. Thus, the ability to recognise

what the enduring trends and features can tell us while being clear about what has manifestly changed is central to the application of history in military and policy fields.

These concerns are not specious academic hand-wringing over ethics, but real and practical challenges to any that seek to better anticipate the future utilising lessons or insights drawn from the past. Too often there is a sense, not always explicit, that the military seeks 'hard' answers, in other words

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*Innovative addition: The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research – based within Robertson House at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst – offers conceptual support to the British Army Credit: Crown Copyright*



clear and unequivocal instruction from its own study of the past or that which it commissions from external academics. Michael Mosser identifies this tendency as reflecting the oppositional nature of the world-views held by the military and academics. The former recognise practical policy ‘problems to be solved’, while the latter see the world as offering ‘interesting puzzles’, which are not necessarily ‘policy relevant’. Policy problems mandate timely and effective solutions, while the latter do not ‘demand quick action, so much as elegant and, ideally, perfect answers’<sup>59</sup>.

Bridging this gap is important for academics who want to see their work applied to practical purpose in ‘the real world’ (by no means all do so). However, it is vital to the military if it is to reach beyond its own pool of experience, expertise, capacity (both time and bandwidth) and ingenuity in tackling developmental challenges of increasing complexity. Of course, this imperative applies just as much to the sciences (natural, human, social, and political), or indeed economics, as it does to history.

Mosser suggests that this divide between academics and practitioners can only be bridged by greater engagement and by active collaboration, praising the sort of integrated military and academic syllabi common to military education on both sides of the Atlantic<sup>60</sup>. However, as we have seen, some academics fear that engagement on military terms will constitute selling out their vocational independence, while plenty of military personnel are wary of consulting theoreticians, who neither understand nor care much about practical policy. Hence, greater interaction and collaboration may not be as simple as it sounds. Innovations like the CHACR, a conjunction of academic and military staff offering independent ‘conceptual support’ to the British Army, will help this process. However, at a more detailed level, there is a need to establish mutually-agreed parameters set around any project to help reconcile conflicting world-views and ensure that the output meets expectations. This ‘contract’ should include agreement on: a clear master research question (and as many secondary or tertiary ones that can be identified); a viable timeframe for delivery (ideally with some degree of flexibility built in); and a format and a character for the output, reflecting academic views of ‘what can be told’ and the military’s requirements. This should allow the academic party freedom as to approach and method, while assuring the military party that an output that meets its needs and timelines will be delivered.

As an illustration, in 2017 the CHACR was commissioned by the British Army’s Strategy Director to conduct a study into historical examples of armies that conducted large-scale reconstitution (i.e. building a mass of new units and formations) from a limited structural base within a constrained timeframe. This was intended as something of a ‘pilot’ project to establish the capacity of the CHACR and how it might

support long-term Army thinking. To this end the CHACR team engaged with Army Strategy staff to create terms of reference for the study, which covered the key parameters identified above, leaving the former free to select their preferred approach and methods and then select suitable case studies, which would offer the insights sought across all eight Defence ‘lines of development’<sup>61</sup>. In particular, and somewhat exceptionally, the study was afforded six months to conduct the study, reflecting the long-term strategic nature of the issue and the fact that the CHACR team had other projects and tasks in hand throughout the period.

The outcome of this project was at least satisfactory, but a number of issues may suggest that the gap between theory and practice (or at least theoretician and practitioner) remains. For a start, while the resulting report undoubtedly contained numerous insights relevant to the Army’s possible future challenge, these could be understood only by reading the totality of the report and not simply its conclusions in isolation. Indeed, the first request from the Strategy staff was for an ‘executive summary’ that would be more accessible to busy senior officers. This was a more than fair request, which

was met, but it does betray the risk that a busy Army staff prefers a diet of simplified bullet points, which stripped of the qualified nuance of the full argument, may be highly misleading. It was also clear that the careful and qualified report offered no quick or easy solutions to the problems of considering possible future expansion from a debased structure and a low resource base. It was never going to and it is doubtful that many thought it would, but to a staff desperately seeking alchemies that will allow more to be done with less it did not offer a ‘total’ answer to the policy challenge in question, or anything like. This in essence, is the key to the utility of history to the military practitioner: it can offer insight and example, which if taken in context and reconciled with current conditions may elicit wisdom that will help unlock solutions to contemporary and future problems, but it cannot hope to do so alone.

One senior military officer, supportive of the military’s ability to learn from history, recently offered an apt analogy, that of the traditional ‘iron’ rifle sight. For him, a good knowledge of history provides a ‘back-sight’, founded upon understanding of our past experience, which when aligned with the ‘fore-sight’ of our best guess as to the future (based upon our knowledge of the present), should ensure that we are aiming broadly in the right direction. Thus, our knowledge of the past can be instructive only in dynamic interaction with our knowledge of the present and intelligent projections of the future, and what we gain is not precision accuracy, but general alignment. Given Professor Sir Michael Howard’s observation that the job of the current military is not to be too far wrong as to future doctrine and its requirements, this analogy and the modest ambition implicit within it appear both practical and pragmatic guidance to both academic and military practitioner.

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Our knowledge of the past can be instructive only in dynamic interaction with our knowledge of the present and intelligent projections of the future, and what we gain is not precision accuracy, but general alignment

<sup>59</sup>M.W. Mosser, ‘Puzzles versus Problems: The Alleged Disconnect between Academics and Military Practitioners’, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2010), 1078-79.

<sup>60</sup>Mosser, ‘Problems versus Puzzles’, 1083-84.

<sup>61</sup>Doctrine, organisation, personnel, equipment, training, logistics, infrastructure, and information.



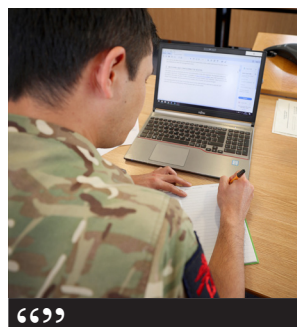
# BETWEEN ACADEME AND THE ARMED FORCES: PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARY DISPUTES AND THE FUTURE OF MILITARY HISTORY

Matthew Ford  
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As several papers in this volume make clear, soldiers and scholars have argued about the purpose, function and place of military history for at least 60 years. At one end of the debate, many university-based historians view military history as parochial at best and weaponised history at worst<sup>62</sup>. By contrast, from the perspective of those in the Services, military history constitutes a database of lessons that can be used to forestall disaster and acts as a wellspring of martial identity. Straddling these two positions lie those in the Professional Military Education (PME) community, educators who must find pragmatic arguments for sustaining the methodological integrity of their profession while making the case for teaching the history of war to the Armed Forces. Over the past two years, following two major conferences and a panel debate at the RUSI Land Warfare Conference, the arguments that frame these positions have been given an airing<sup>63</sup>. The prospects for bringing about a redefinition of the field that either reconciles soldiers and scholars or favours one side in the debate over the other is the subject of this paper.

## Military history as professional boundary dispute

There are a variety of functional, cultural, and structural reasons for concluding that military history is on the frontline of a professional boundary dispute, one that is unlikely to change anytime in the future. Obviously, this stems from the fundamentally different functions of the academy when compared to the Armed Forces. But it is also the case that the respective professions have different corporate challenges that their shared interest in military history cannot easily overcome. Soldiers have little understanding of, or interest in, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) or the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) while scholars prefer the archive to the armoured



The Armed Forces struggle to know what they know, typically having to rebuild their understanding of a problem by tracing an email chain that describes the evolution of discussions

personnel carrier (APC). For academics, the REF and the TEF frame their approach to publication, teaching and ultimately employability. For soldiers, the APC may represent the difference between life and death.

Professor Anthony King has written extensively about the challenges of leadership and command in the military and rightly observes that the armed forces possess a ‘crack on’ and ‘can do’ culture. Confronted with a problem the military mindset is to solve it, find ways around it or do both. Academics working on applied subjects – typically concerned with science, technology, engineering and mathematics – may share this problem-solving outlook but those scholars working in the arts and humanities tend towards a more critical and theory-laden approach to their work. Culturally speaking then, historians are predisposed to finding complex connections that produce grey answers that hinder rather than frame decisive action.

Structurally, the lifeblood of academic research has traditionally been the archive (both paper and digital), the previously unknown repository of diaries, or the recordings of face-to-face interviews. By contrast the Armed Forces’ method of maintaining their own archive is framed by their approach to operations and the stresses this puts on record keeping for temporary versus permanent headquarters<sup>64</sup>. More recently this has been further compounded by the use of email and the haphazard approach to digital rather than paper archiving combined with a lack of investment in record management. The result is that the Armed Forces struggle to know what they know, typically having to rebuild their understanding of a problem by tracing an email chain that describes the evolution of discussions. Unfortunately, as campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, a serious shortcoming in relation to maintaining records has had ramifications for the MOD as it sought to defend its approach to allegations of war crimes<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>62</sup>‘On Debating the Role of Military Historians’, *The Dead Prussian Podcast*, Episode 58, 23 March 2018: [thedeadprussian.libsyn.com/episode-58-on-debating-the-role-of-military-historians-the-dead-prussian-podcast](http://thedeadprussian.libsyn.com/episode-58-on-debating-the-role-of-military-historians-the-dead-prussian-podcast) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>63</sup>The two conferences include, ‘War in Historical and Contemporary Perspective’ held at King’s College London on 5 June 2017 and ‘Applied History: The British Army and the Study of War’ held at RMA on 26 June 2018. More information about the King’s conference can be found here: [defenceindepth.co/2017/06/30/war-in-historical-and-contemporary-perspective-conference-report/comment-page-1](http://defenceindepth.co/2017/06/30/war-in-historical-and-contemporary-perspective-conference-report/comment-page-1) [accessed 28 November 2018]. The RUSI Land Warfare Conference panel was on 19 June 2018 and was live streamed. The video of this panel is available here: [youtube.com/watch?v=YP-Ph\\_Fnu\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP-Ph_Fnu_4) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>64</sup>A. Hoskins and M. Ford, ‘Flawed, yet Authoritative? Organisational Memory and the Future of Official Military History after Chilcot’, *British Journal for Military History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2017): [bjmh.org.uk/index.php/bjmh/article/view/155](http://bjmh.org.uk/index.php/bjmh/article/view/155) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>65</sup>The academic literature on British Army war crimes is now significant. See for example H. Bennett, ‘The Baha Mousa Tragedy: British Army Detention and Interrogation from Iraq to Afghanistan’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2014): [journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00539.x?journalCode=bpia](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00539.x?journalCode=bpia) [accessed 28 November 2018]. For a more general read on allegations of war crimes see S. Shackle, ‘Why we may never know if British troops committed war crimes in Iraq’, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2018: [theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/07/british-troops-war-crimes-iraq-historic-allegations-team](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/07/british-troops-war-crimes-iraq-historic-allegations-team) [accessed 28 November 2018].



Soldiers have little understanding of, or interest in, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) or the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) while scholars prefer the archive to the armoured personnel carrier (APC). For academics, the REF and the TEF frame their approach to publication, teaching and ultimately employability. For soldiers, the APC may represent the difference between life and death

Put simply, then, the Armed Forces and the university-based academic have different functional, cultural and structural outlooks. Their interests overlap in the field of military history but their approaches to the subject are derived from professional concerns that have little in common. Military history is consequently buffeted between soldier and scholar, and typically only finds a safe haven in those institutions responsible for teaching the military, institutions that do not find themselves subject to the same research and teaching constraints that exist in academia more broadly.

**Parochial history, weaponised history or just poor history?**

Over the past decade it has become clear that PME institutions cannot insulate military history from the different professional concerns of academia and the Armed Forces. On the contrary, for many university-based historians, co-locating military history inside those institutions with responsibility for educating the Armed Forces only reinforces the parochial and militarised nature of the field<sup>66</sup>. Irrespective of whether this is a fair description of the work of those engaged in educating the armed forces, when framed this way, university-based historians view military history as the means for reinforcing martial perspectives without challenging or critiquing them.

For the university historian, the result is a subject that does not conform with the received norms of academic conduct, where conclusions must be independently drawn, and research undertaken for its own sake. Instead, parochial military history only considers subjects that are palatable to the military<sup>67</sup>. Consequently, for the critics, military history is weaponised history, that is to say that its purpose is to improve the performance of the Armed Forces, not develop an understanding for the nature of war and its impact on society.

In many ways the university-based historian’s critique resonates with Sir Michael Howard’s original 1961 lecture on the use and abuse of military history<sup>68</sup>. According to Howard only by surveying the evidence in width, depth and context can military

<sup>66</sup>Kim Wagner takes this view; stimulated by an article he wrote, Kim and I engaged in a Twitter discussion about military history. For more see [twitter.com/KimAtiWagner/status/948979978775023617](https://twitter.com/KimAtiWagner/status/948979978775023617) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>67</sup>K.A. Wagner, ‘Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency’, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 85 (2018), 217-37: [academic.oup.com/hwj/article/doi/10.1093/hwj/dbx053/4785934](https://academic.oup.com/hwj/article/doi/10.1093/hwj/dbx053/4785934) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>68</sup>M. Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’. Howard’s 1961 lecture was reprinted in the *RUSI Journal*, March 2008: [tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071849308445676](https://tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071849308445676) [accessed 28 November 2018].



history improve the soldier's ability to understand and fulfil their function. But for the 21st-Century academic historian, Howard's methodology does not go far enough. Indeed, for university-based scholars, Howard's 1961 view of the discipline is insufficiently critical and ultimately only serves to reinforce the divide between parochial military history and mainstream history. No doubt partly driven by the demands of the REF, this reflects the fact that the wider concerns of academic history have started to re-fashion the way military history is understood. For history departments outside the PME orbit, the result has been a significant broadening of the research agenda such that it now includes more heavily theory-laden approaches to the study of war. These approaches draw together discussions of gender and sexual orientation, archaeology and architecture, orientalism and race, colonialisation and resistance, material culture and political change, subjects that have sparked interest within the military, but which have yet to become the central concerns of military history.

What recent debates have made clear is that if the Armed Forces want to make use of history as part of their professional military education then they will need to recognise the validity of this wider academic agenda. For if they do not then they leave themselves open to accusations of pursuing a deeply anti-intellectual approach to history which in turn undermines the academic credibility of military education<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, even for scholars from within PME institutions, the traditional interpretations of military history have become too parochial when compared with contemporary mainstream academic scholarship<sup>70</sup>.

### Military history as history

If the field of military history is going to successfully evolve, then, it must overcome the professional boundary disputes that frame its existence and at the same time respond to the charge of parochialism. In this respect, in his 2014 endorsement of the *British Journal for Military History*, Sir Michael Howard's position has developed from his 1961 RUSI lecture to one where, "military history is now too important to be left to the military historians"<sup>71</sup>. The implication of Howard's observation is that military history will have to take on more of the practices that frame university-based historians. This in turn implies that military history will have to abide by the same theoretical and methodological standards as the discipline of history as a whole.

Of course, scholars working in PME institutions will protest that their research is as rigorous as their university-based colleagues. However, an even punchier riposte to those who argue that military history is parochial history, comes from accusing the academic critics of remaining aloof and

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Allan Mallinson's quote from the recent RUSI Land Warfare Conference: 'Military History has been colonised by young academics with no experience of soldiering' See [twitter.com/RUSI\\_org/status/1008995357039132673](https://twitter.com/RUSI_org/status/1008995357039132673) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>70</sup> As has been noted by Drs Aimée Fox and David Morgan-Owen, both of whom work for KCL at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Shrivenham. See A. Fox and D. Morgan-Owen, 'Whose voice matters? The British Army in 2018', Wavell Room, 21 June 2018: [wavellroom.com/2018/06/21/whose-voice-matters-the-british-army-in-2018](http://wavellroom.com/2018/06/21/whose-voice-matters-the-british-army-in-2018) [accessed 28 November 2018].

<sup>71</sup> M. Howard, opening endorsement for the *British Journal for Military History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014): [bjmh.org.uk/index.php/bjmh/issue/view/Issue/1/53](http://bjmh.org.uk/index.php/bjmh/issue/view/Issue/1/53) [accessed 28 November 2018].

unwilling to engage in the kickabout that is educating the military. By dismissing military history as failing to apply the sorts of theoretical and methodological approaches that frame mainstream history, university-based historians concede that the discipline is lost to the military and their immediate instrumental needs. Like traditionalists who view experience as key to military history, this too represents a deeply anti-intellectual position.

University-based historians do therefore need to step up to their social responsibilities as public intellectuals. To dismiss the whole field of military history as parochial history in effect does the Armed Forces a disservice. It is the fundament of academic debate for scholars, whether in mainstream history departments or those working in PME institutions, to disagree with each other. However, given its importance for framing debates beyond the academy it is socially irresponsible for scholars to take a side-swipe at the whole field of military history. Indeed, if university-based historians pick up sticks and leave military history to wallow in its parochial mire, then what chance is there for avoiding the ahistorical misunderstandings that so regularly find themselves reproduced in military discourse.

### Politics, progress, and the future of military history

Following the EU referendum, Britain is once again seeking to redefine its role in the world. Public discussions have sought to re-frame the UK as a global, outward looking country, drawing on an apparently benign imperial past. This has implications for Britain's Armed Forces who will be expected to find ways of making this global outlook somehow more real.

However, as scholars have investigated how imperial order was maintained, they have rightfully explored the limitations of a narrative that emphasises British beneficence and instead have produced a close examination of how Britain's Armed Forces were used to sustain empire. At its most critical this has shown that, far from being a force for good, Britain's Armed Forces were just as capable of repression and atrocity as the armed forces of any other nation. When framed this way it is self-evident that PME is exceptionally important. For if the Armed Forces are not taught the most up-to-date approaches to Britain's military past then how will they properly understand the martial politics of the future? At its simplest, then, if Britain's historic civilising mission is emphasised over and above more accurate analyses of coercion in Empire then what lessons might the Armed Forces draw?

Perceived as socially and intellectually conservative, military history has long been ridiculed by 'proper' historians for being overly militarised and misrepresentative. Caricatured in this way, military history thus occupies a cultural space at odds with a prevailing academic logic. The problem for university-based scholars, however, is that if they truly seek to recast a narrative of Britain's military past along more progressive lines then almost certainly, they will need to get involved in military history. For only by more directly engaging with military history will university-based academics create the intellectual space for helping the military gain a proper understanding of the nature of war. For too long military historians have focused on war's conduct. It is now an imperative for the field to understand how war frames politics.









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## CHACR MISSION STATEMENT

**To conduct and sponsor research and analysis into the enduring nature and changing character of conflict on land and to be the active hub for scholarship and debate within the Army in order to develop and sustain the Army's conceptual component of fighting power.**