

The Professional Edge

The importance of professional reading

by Gen James N. Mattis

The following article is in response to a question posed by a friend regarding the relative importance of professional reading for the modern-day warrior.

The problem with being too busy to read is that you learn by experience (or by your men's experience)—that is the hard way. By reading, you learn through others' experiences—generally a better way to do business—especially in our line of work where the consequences of incompetence are so final for young men. Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flatfooted by any situation, and I've never been at a loss for how any problem has been addressed (successfully or unsuccessfully) before. It doesn't give me all the answers, but it lights what is often a dark path ahead.

With Task Force 58, I had Sir William Slim's book *Defeat Into Victory*, books about the Russian and British experiences in Afghanistan, and a couple of others. Going into Iraq, *The Siege*—a book about the British defeat at Al Kut in World War I—was required reading for field grade officers. I also had Slim's book; reviewed T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; Janet Wallach's *The Desert Queen*—a good book about the life of Gertrude Bell, the British archaeologist who virtually founded the modern state of Iraq; and Thomas L. Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. I also went deeply into B.H. Liddell Hart's book, *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American*, and J.F.C. Fuller's book, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*, got a lot of my attention (although I never imagined that my headquarters would end up only 500 meters from where he lay in state in Babylon). And I keep

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David Hicks' book on Marcus Aurelius—*The Emperor's Handbook: A New Translation of the Meditations*—with me wherever I go.

Ultimately, a real understanding of history means that we face nothing new under the sun. For all those who would say that the nature of war has fundamentally changed, that the tactics are wholly new, etc., I must respectfully say, "Not really!" Alexander the Great would not be in the least bit perplexed by the enemy that we face right now in Iraq, and our leaders going into this fight do their troops a disservice by not studying (studying, vice just reading) the men who have gone before us.

We have been fighting on this planet for 5,000 years, and we should take advantage of the experience of those who have gone before us. "Winging it" and filling body bags as we sort out what works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of incompetence in our profession.

As commanders and staff officers, we are coaches and sentries for our units. How can we coach anything if we don't know a lot more than just the tactics, techniques, and procedures? What happens when you're on a dynamic battlefield and things are changing faster than higher headquarters can stay abreast? Do you not adapt because you cannot conceptualize faster than the enemy's adaptation? (Darwin has a

pretty good theory about the outcome for those who cannot adapt to changing circumstances—in the Information Age, things can change rather abruptly and at warp speed, especially the moral high ground that our regimented thinkers ceded far too quickly in our recent fights.)

And how can you be a sentinel and not have your unit caught flatfooted if you don't know what the warning signs are—that your unit's preparations are not sufficient for the specifics of a tasking that you have not anticipated? Those who must adapt to overcoming an independent enemy's will are not allowed the luxury of ignorance of their profession.

This is not new to the Marine Corps' approach to warfighting. Going into Kuwait 12 years ago, I read (and re-read) Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's, *The Rommel Papers*; Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery's book, *Eyes Officers*; Bruce Catton's, *Grant Takes Command* (need for commanders to get along, "commanders' relationships" being more important than "command relationships"); and some others. As a result, the enemy has paid when I had the opportunity to go against him, and I believe that many of my young guys lived because I didn't waste their lives because I didn't have the vision in my mind of how to destroy the enemy at the least cost to our guys and to the innocents on the battlefield.

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