WHY WE STUDY: OUR DUTY OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT AS MILITARY PROFESSIONALS
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All in all, considering that war is the most demanding and consequential of human endeavors, it is astonishing how cursorily it tends to be studied by its practitioners.1

I first must thank the Editor of the Commander Canadian Army’s Reading List for the opportunity to share my thoughts as an introduction to this first Supplement. To me, personal reading is a fundamental component of military professionalism, and thus it should be a passion and a habit. For far too many, in-depth reading is an activity best left behind in school or relegated to academics. As practitioners of the disciplined application of violence against our nation’s foes in the most demanding of circumstances, we need every possible advantage. Indeed, it is incumbent upon us to provide our soldiers the very best chances for success, and to provide our nation the excellence in conducting operations it expects and needs. Reading can provide the edge.

Our individual experiences in war are thankfully few. While collectively we have amassed many tours in this so-called Long War, for the vast majority of us our experiences are relatively narrow when compared to the full spectrum of conflict. Those with combat experience may fall into the trap of believing oneself all knowing – ‘been there, done that’, but without a humble acknowledgement of experiential limitations, one may blunder into future operations with preconceived notions, over-confidence, ignorance, and a weak base for decision-making. Reading can fill in the gaps in our preparation. Reading provides the military professional the three key benefits of deepening the contextual understanding of a given situation or function, acting as a catalyst for developing new ideas, and providing a wider base (pattern recognition) from which to inform our intuition. Let’s explore each of these in turn.

**Contextual Understanding**

Woe is the leader who deploys into an operation armed only with a superficial appreciation of it. Although an understanding of the relevant history, politics, culture, and other sociological factors has always been of great benefit, current operations are characterized by what Rupert Smith, in *The Utility of Force*, calls “war amongst the people.” Our soldiers, especially in the newly coined but not so new ‘hybrid warfare’, have to operate amongst local populations, engage with them, and determine who is who. War is an extension of politics, and as all politics are local, so even our junior leaders need deep understanding to be effective. The platoon and company commander of today needs the same (or perhaps more) grasp of history, culture, politics, economics, and other subjects that brigade and division commanders required in the Second World War.

Globalization has changed our world in many ways. With the globalization of information through the Internet, much data and information is readily available online, and is easily consumed in isolated chunks. We can easily pull up facts and figures and the latest sound bite in the news. But in the cognitive hierarchy, this ‘data’ alone does not confer the necessary understanding that leads to wisdom and thus better judgement. News stories, intelligence reports, and the like are of much greater utility if considered against the backdrop of a wider situational context. Normally, authors go to great lengths to
develop their premises that form a logic trail to underpin key arguments, and in reading their works one generally develops a much deeper appreciation of the issue at hand.

Henry Kissinger, in *World Order*, makes it clear why the acquisition of knowledge from books provides an experience different from the Internet:

Facts are rarely self-explanatory; their significance, analysis, and interpretation – at least in the foreign policy world – depend on context and relevance. As ever more issues are treated as if of a factual nature, the premise becomes established that for every question there must be a researchable answer, that problems and solutions are not so much to be thought through as to be “looked up.” But in the relations between states – and in many other fields – information, to be truly useful, must be placed in the broader context of history and experience to emerge as actual knowledge. And a society is fortunate if its leaders can occasionally rise to the level of wisdom.

This contextual understanding goes beyond specific operations and geography and has great value for the spectrum of functions and activities. The actions and reactions of soldiers in combat, the impacts of surprise, the implementation of technological innovations, the vagaries of civil-military relations, and the incredible powers of leadership are but a few examples of common features of the Profession of Arms that have applicability beyond their specific circumstances.

In my view one of the most important of the common features of the Profession of Arms is the timelessness of interpersonal relations. We still go to war for, in the words of Thucydides, the very human reasons of fear, interest, and honour. In violent conflict throughout the ages, technology has changed, tactics have changed, our sense of time and space has changed, but the one constant has been people and how they interact – this has not changed. Indeed, warfare is the ultimate expression of interpersonal relations, where the stakes are immense, even existential. Personal follies and character strengths are magnified by the stress of war. Key decisions are influenced by emotions and human irrationalities are rife. The complex dynamics of the relations between commanders, especially in a coalition, and the impact of personality on non-operational factors in decision-making are particularly insightful – witness Edwin Coddington’s *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, Rick Atkinson’s *The Liberation Trilogy*, and our own Doug Delaney’s *Corps Commanders: Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-45*. Of course, one always gets more of a candid story by delving into books written after the death of the protagonists, because the truth-limiting effects of bruised egos is reduced. These dynamics are evident and timeless at all levels, from Homer’s *Iliad* to Jim Frederick’s *Blackhearts: A Platoon’s Descent into Madness in Iraq’s Triangle of Death*. Developing our understanding of human dynamics and the role of emotional intelligence are key rewards from professional reading.

**New Ideas**

It has been said many times that ‘if you want a new idea, read an old book.’ We are often confronted by seemingly novel challenges – well, for us perhaps. If one digs deep enough, there are very few new challenges that our predecessors have not faced in some form or another. Problem-solving by analogy is a valid form of creativity, and the more analogies one has to draw from, the richer the potential solutions. New ideas can come from a wide variety of works. Military history provides direct examples of what worked and did not in a particular set of circumstances. Non-fiction from other disciplines (such as business, sociology, psychology, philosophy, science and technology, among others) can provide cross-cutting concepts with relevance to the Profession of Arms. For example, the emerging
work on positive psychology (Martin Seligman’s *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*), can be very much applied to soldier resilience and well-being.

The imagination of fiction writers is a fertile ground for new ideas. Well-written historical fiction, based in well-researched historical reality, is particularly useful for the impact of human relations. Contemporary and new future war fiction can provide an array of plausible what-if scenarios. A good example is *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War*. Science fiction is rich with new ideas not constrained by the baggage of current realities that can explore the interaction of technology, politics, and human dynamics in novel environments. Not insignificantly, fiction can also be highly entertaining – no one says reading has to be all work!

**Pattern Recognition and Mental Models**

Decision-making is at the heart of our role as military leaders, regardless of level, and reading can feed the richness of our decisions. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow* Daniel Kahneman describes in detail our two decision-making processes: ‘System One’ is based on the subconscious mind, or intuition where we immediately go to a decision, and ‘System Two’ is based on deliberative or rational thought where options are consciously compared before choosing. The vast majority of decisions we make in the military utilize ‘System One’, shown by a 1989 study where US Army officers were found to use intuition in 95% of decisions. Intuition is nothing more than sub-conscious pattern recognition coupled with mental models. Patterns are an arrangement of circumstances with certain tell-tale signs that when experienced, may indicate similarity to other arrangements of circumstances. Mental models are our personal understanding of ‘how things work’.

Gary Klein, who has pioneered much work on intuitive decision-making, including in military contexts, contends that “People solve problems by [subconsciously] matching them to familiar patterns and spotting leverage points that have been successful in similar situations.” It follows, therefore, that the bigger the bank of our patterns, and the more refined our mental models, the better our intuition, leading to better decisions. A clear example is the combat estimate. The experienced tactical commander will often not ruminate on comparing approaches – a decision is immediate. Having done it enough times on similar ground against a similar enemy, a concept of operations readily springs from intuition – ‘we’re doing a right flanking’.

The same may be said of the Operational Planning Process. Experienced commanders will often intuitively gravitate towards or dictate one course of action. This is the basis of the Recognition-Primed Decision Model, where a commander, heavily involved in the mission analysis stage, intuitively grasps a solution, develops a rough concept of operations, and gives it to the staff to operationalize, all greatly reducing the length of the decision cycle. Even when multiple options are developed for deliberation, the creative process in the black box that drives course of action development is based on intuition.

The danger with intuition is a lack of a sufficient number of relevant patterns from which to draw, which speaks to inexperienced commanders, or veteran commanders facing novel situations, for which a much more deliberate process is prudent. As each new experience builds on previous ones to build the depth and quality of our patterns and mental models, the accumulation of relevant experiences is in our best interest. Our personal experiences form the deepest patterns and mental models, but as mentioned earlier, our experiences may be few and narrow. However, garnering experience vicariously through others is a tremendous way to build our own base, and this is where reading comes in. Experiencing events, concepts, and emotions through an author’s words adds to our
own experiences and are readily recalled at the subconscious level through building our bank of patterns and mental models.

**Active Reading**

As military professionals, with an understanding of how we really make decisions, it is incumbent that we do not solely rest on the laurels of our operational experience, however great it may be. Our pattern and mental model base needs to be broad and deep. For a military career that is only intermittently punctuated by operations, the best way to supplement our own experience with that of others is to read profusely and actively. What I mean by that is we cannot passively sit back and let the words be absorbed through osmosis. We should actively think about what we’re reading. Part and parcel of all of this ‘active reading’ is taking the time to reflect. My faculty advisor from the US Army War College, Dr. Antulio Echevaria, argues that many military professionals focus on the accumulation of knowledge rather than analyzing and evaluating it.5 Perfunctorily going through a book, without thought, provides only superficial understanding and patterns that don’t reach their potential to contribute to intuition. In some cases, it may even be a waste of time.

I find a useful technique, especially with non-fiction works, is to read with a pencil in hand, think critically about what the author is saying, and make marginal notes to reflect one’s thoughts. A tremendous technique to deepen the resonance of reading is to keep a journal where one records the thoughts and key takeaways of what is read. The very act of committing pen to paper strengthens the ability to retrieve key concepts. This takes self-discipline, but the results are much greater.

**Conclusion**

Many great commanders throughout history have been committed students of war, with self-studies based mostly on professional reading. Their examples should resonate with us at all rank levels, not just the highest. Reading enhances the professional understanding and abilities of a section commander and an army commander. Reading informs and enhances our judgement, deepens our situational understanding, gives us new ideas and different ways of looking at seemingly intractable problems, all making us better leaders with a sharpened edge to make a difference, regardless of our level of responsibility. Reading builds our ‘explicit’ knowledge that we can readily recall and employ, as well as our ‘tacit’ knowledge that lies beneath the surface of consciousness, leading to our mental agility and ability to improvise in uncertain and unpredictable situations.6

We are all busy, consumed with the minutia of our military bureaucracy, and can readily find excuses why we cannot find the time to read more. Given that delivering success in operations is our *raison d’être*, and as military professionals we do everything we can to enable that success, the excuse that we are too busy to read does not pass muster. We owe it to our soldiers and our country to prepare ourselves as best as we possibly can – and reading is a key component of that long-term readiness. I urge you to weave it into the fabric of your lifestyle.

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