

Mars and Minerva: the god of war and the goddess of wisdom and reform of professional military education

An edited version of a presentation to the Institute on 13 December 2016 by

Daniel P. Marston

Principal, Military and Defence Studies Programme, Australian Command and Staff College; Professor of Military Studies, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University¹



Professor Marston discusses the role of applied military history (the art of war) in professional military education and then describes the development of the art of war in British, United States and Australian staff colleges since 2001.

Key words: professional military education; applied military history; art of war; staff colleges; Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst; Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth; Australian Command and Staff College, Canberra.

I want to thank the Institute, in particular Professor Michael Hough, for inviting me to speak today on professional military education (PME) and the reform which has occurred in the post-2001 period to different levels in the various western militaries. I am going to discuss specifically the role of ‘applied’ military history – the art of war – within the context of PME, and what has occurred since 2003 in the British, American, and Australian militaries. I will start this discussion with a quote from General James Mattis (Ret’d), now the United States Secretary of Defense:

“Ultimately, a real understanding of history means that we face nothing new under the sun. For all the ‘Fourth Generation of War’ intellectuals running around today saying that the nature of war has fundamentally changed ... I must respectfully say: ‘Not really’. Alex the Great would not be in the least perplexed by the enemy we face right now in Iraq, and our leaders going into this fight do their troops a disservice by not studying (*vice* just reading) the men who have gone before us. We have been fighting on this planet for 5000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. ‘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.” (Murray and Sinnreich 2006: 7)

Applied Military History in a Professional Military Education

The last 16 years of war have highlighted longstanding and serious debates about PME and how best to prepare our fighting men and women for future conflict. There are disputes about which disciplines are most applicable for understanding the profession of arms;

and the study of military history has frequently been sidelined, although there has been renewed interest in recent years.

There are many reasons why military history fell into disfavour; some were relevant to specific ways that military history had and has been taught – from an overemphasis on dates, numbers, uniforms, or capabilities of various weapon systems, to a simplistic or nationalist presentation of the topic. Emeritus Professor Williamson Murray has posited that “... serious study of history is difficult. It is no simple matter to extract what is relevant and important from the wealth of recorded military experience. Often, what appears relevant is trivial and what appears significant is not easily transferable. Nor does history furnish straightforward and comfortable answers to contemporary questions.” (Murray and Sinnreich 2006: 3)

While the study and application of military history may be difficult, I would argue that this discipline should be at the core of education for professional officers and non-commissioned officers throughout the western militaries. As Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper (USMC) has noted: “The value of military history to the professional military officer remains incontestable. Those who might urge its reduction or elimination from military schools and colleges are woefully uninformed at best or completely ignorant of the basic underpinnings of their supposed profession at worst.” (Murray and Sinnreich 2006: 54)

There is no question that there can be issues with applied military history if taught incorrectly. British Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely (Ret’d) wrote that “a little military history may be more dangerous than none at all ... we should treat with circumspection those who believe the study of military history can in some way substitute for wider professional study. Military history must be part of a balanced diet, alongside, for example, the study of military theory, operational analysis and training.” (Murray and Sinnreich 2006: 32)

¹Email: daniel.marston@anu.edu.au

Recent Academic Experiences

Let me now highlight the experiences of various academics since 2001 in support of applied military history and reform at the various PME institutions. A team of academics from the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, has over the last 15 years attempted to shift the central foundation of PME to applied military history – also known as the art of war. This paper will discuss this important journey and where things stand at present.

As stated earlier, applied military history is one part of a larger framework for the continued professionalization of the western militaries. All members of this international team have been military historians for many years. We were all introduced, early in our careers, to an important article by Sir Michael Howard which discussed the use and abuse of military history. Many of us have striven since we first read this piece to approach all our work within military history, PME, and on the battlefields of the Middle East and South Asia through the three core concepts he articulated (emphasis mine):

“Three general rules of study must therefore be borne in mind by the officer who studies military history as a guide to his profession and who wishes to avoid pitfalls. First, he must study in **width**. He must observe the way in which warfare has developed over a long historical period. Only by seeing what does change can one deduce what does not; and as much as can be learnt from the great discontinuities of military history as from the apparent similarities of the techniques employed by the great captains through the ages ... Next, he must study in **depth**. He should take a single campaign and explore it thoroughly, not simply from official histories, but from memoirs, letters, diaries ... until the tidy outlines dissolve and he catches a glimpse of the confusion and horror of real experience ... and, lastly, he must study in **context**. Campaigns and battles are not like games of chess or football matches, conducted in total detachment from their environment according to strictly defined rules. 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 and defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, and economic factors which explain why armies are constituted as they are, and why their leaders conduct them in the way they do ... It must not be forgotten that the true use of history, military or civil ... is not to make men clever for the next time; it is to make them wise forever.” (Howard 1992)

Royal Military College, Sandhurst

I returned to the United Kingdom in 2003 to take up a senior lecturer position at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, the first American to do so specifically in the

War Studies Department. In that role, I began to work with various people in the British Army, chiefly around issues of reform. During the same period our head of department, Dr Duncan Anderson, began a re-organization of the War Studies mission and teaching.

Anderson was keen for his team of historians to apply their military historical knowledge in support of the British Field Army, both in the United Kingdom and on operations. At that time, there were institutional issues within the British Army regarding the use of military history. The War Studies Department had just lost an important pre-staff college course due to budget and time constraints, **partially caused by the pressures of combat operations**. Over the course of 2004-5, however, with the addition of ‘real-life lectures’ from allied battlefield commanders, the senior command started to take notice of reform at Sandhurst.

The War Studies Department was asked to support more and more battalions, brigades, and divisional headquarters with pre-deployment training and education packages, first for Iraq and then for Afghanistan. We were also included on transatlantic discussions and debates about operations with our colleagues at the Marine Corps University at Quantico, the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, and the United States Military Academy at West Point. This was all very much bottom-up reform, but the senior military command on both sides of the Atlantic started to recognize the need for military historians to be involved in debates.

By 2006, we had established a strong transatlantic community. The War Studies faculty began to deploy forward under the auspices of teaching pre-staff college courses for majors in Iraq and Afghanistan. For some of us, this was a key professional opportunity to work alongside the United States military or with specific British units and formations, in the field and in battle.

For some of us, these trips lasted more than a few months, or occurred two to four times a year. Serving commanders recognized the value of this engagement, and consistently provided support to specific War Studies faculty to work on the battlefield. While we supported the field armies of both nations, we continued to reform the War Studies packages at Sandhurst and the pre-staff college courses. It was all applied military history – not just about current operations. We tied study of past conflicts to contemporary debates on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. We always used the key tenets of Professor Howard, studying in depth, width, and context – recognizing, however, that what we were doing was important, but probably not to the level of analysis that Sir Michael had envisioned. More work was needed.

Some of us were given positions in the Multinational Forces–Iraq and International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan to work at a deeper level in terms of operational planning and campaign reviews. Some of my Sandhurst colleagues were heavily involved in standing up both the Iraqi Army and the Afghan

National Army officer training courses – with some still working in Kabul to this day.

United States Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth

For anyone who has worked in either Iraq or Afghanistan since 2004, we have seen a major tactical reform process take place within the American and later British militaries. It has often taken time, however, for the concepts of reform and attending debates to reach the various PME establishments. In 2009, I returned to the United States to take up the inaugural Ike Skelton Chair in the Art of War at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth. I continued to work with my colleagues across the United States and United Kingdom military history communities to keep up the momentum of reform.

While at Fort Leavenworth, I was given a key opportunity to continue the reform process. The Dean, Dr Chris King, and the deputy commandant and acting commandant of the Combined Arms Centre, then Brigadier Ed Cardon, asked for me to create a rigorous masters-level course. I created a small-group tutorial model with the support of academics from the Departments of Military History and Leadership and Command, along with Dr Robert Baumann, Director of the Master in Military Arts and Sciences degree. This course, named the Art of War Programme, used diverse case studies and attempted to follow the Howard framework to provide an applied history model and expand the knowledge and understanding of the profession of arms.

We selected two teams a year from the various branches of the United States Army, chiefly from the combat arms. In 2011, we were allowed to expand recruitment to include the international cohort of students on the Command and General Staff course. We had some 'attrition' in the teams, as not all officers could keep up with the demands and the rigour of the course.

I had the honour to brief and work with the late Representative Ike Skelton (Democrat, Missouri), former chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, regarding the Art of War teams. Ike had been a major critic of the state of PME since the 1970s. In 2010, he stated: "Frankly, some of the concerns I had 20 years ago still loom large. First, are our professional military education schools creating the strategic thinkers we need? And second, are the services identifying strategic thinkers and are these thinkers being offered the right career opportunities?" In 2012, one of the highlights of my career occurred when, during a visit to his home in Lexington, Missouri, he stated that Art of War was what he had always hoped for in PME to deal with his two core questions.

The Art of War programme aimed to create the next generation of strategic thinkers for the United States military (we were allowed to recruit officers from all services from 2011). Art of War graduates have not only

written masters theses that have gone on to be peer reviewed and published, but have also gone back to active duty positions in-theatre and performed beyond expectations. Within the United States military, we have achieved a success rate of over 80 per cent for command positions for the 2010-2012 cohorts.

One United States Army Art of War graduate reflected on his learning experience: "The insights gained have left me with more questions than answers, but have increased my ability to understand greater complexities of war rather than the rhetorical narrative that accompanies cursory study of any topic ... [This programme is t]he toughest challenge I've yet faced in the military, and certainly the most brainpower intensive. Outside of command, this is my most valuable experience, both personally and professionally. This is what the institutional Army must do for its leaders. Assume risk with the science of war (*e.g.* things we can figure out quickly, apply rational models to) and give much more weight to the instruction of military history and the art of war. I have learned more in the last six months than in the previous 10 years in the Army, without a doubt."² This programme continues to this day at Fort Leavenworth.

Australian Command and Staff College, Canberra

Now let me shift to efforts in Australia. In 2011, the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University (ANU) won a 10-year contract to provide the Australian Command and Staff College and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with a postgraduate programme for its students. The then commandant of the Australian Defence College, Rear Admiral James Goldrick, had recognized the need for a university to be given 10 years to create and bed down a programme as opposed to the previous 5-year standard. This change was a key to reform in Australia.

After an international recruitment process, I was honoured to be selected to lead this programme. Senior colleagues in the United States and United Kingdom militaries also were pleased at the potential to bring another ally into ongoing PME reform efforts, and asked that I continue to support their work, both in theatre and with reform questions of PME to which I agreed.

We developed the course from 2013, with some significant changes to the curriculum. I took the Fort Leavenworth Art of War concept and put it inside the revised Military and Defence Studies Programme, planning to take more than 150 students. My arrival created some unease within the ADF about an American 'taking over'; however, I was fortunate that my established relationships with senior commanders in the United Kingdom and United States helped to ease the transition and reassure the ADF leadership. By the end of 2012, with major support from the then

²Team leader of the second Fort Leavenworth Art of War programme, 2011.

Australian Defence College commandant, Major General Craig Orme, I had the pleasure of meeting with senior ADF command to highlight the way forward for the Australian Command and Staff College.

We had established support for the ANU programme; the next step was to prove the concept. From 2013 to the present, we have been able to demonstrate the value of the Military and Defence Studies Programme; Australian Command and Staff College graduates have gone on to key positions, have been able to achieve in their roles, and their contributions have been recognized by ADF senior leadership.

Military and Defence Studies Programme

The Military and Defence Studies Programme uses applied military history and strategic studies to prepare the future generations of the ADF. We have a building-block system of courses: Strategy; Operations I, II, III; Leadership and Command; Australian Strategic and Defence Policy; and Joint Operational Planning Process. We do this all through nine core themes: nature and character of war; political objective; unity of effort; strategic and military culture; learning and adaptation; leadership and command; geography and operating environment; sustainment and logistics; and joint operational planning.³

We have been officially recognized by both the ANU and overseas staff colleges as one of the best masters/PME programmes available.⁴ While we have been successful (and even Sir Michael has been impressed by what we have done), we continue to seek refinement.

Following the demonstrated success of the Military and Defence Studies Programme, the ADF asked for a small-group, intensive, masters degree to be established inside the course, along the same lines as the Fort Leavenworth Art of War teams. I must commend the flexibility and forward thinking of both the ANU and ADF to establish a team in 2015 on a very tight timescale. We have now had two Australian Art of War teams complete the programme and are about to begin selection for the third team from the 2017 cohort.

An ADF member who completed the 2015 Art of War programme summed up the experience as follows: "I like the fact that it forces military professionals, be they civilian or uniform, to actually think about the professional arms in a level of depth that most people either haven't had the opportunity, or the push, to do previously. It has been said before that this programme as it is currently structured makes people understand the brutality of the profession they are involved in that may have been obscured in previous postings. The Military and Defence Studies Programme, using history

in-depth to understand the profession, and come to terms with the complexity of the profession as it stands, is challenging a lot of people and breaking down their assumptions about their own understanding of the world."⁵

Conclusion

I would like to end with another quote from Professor Williamson Murray: "Young soldiers and marines, as well as scholars, take their cues from the leaders of their profession. Today, in a period of accelerating strategic and technological change, it is all the more essential that soldiers confront the future with a firm understanding of war's continuities and that scholars furnish them the best historical analysis of which they are capable in which to ground that understanding. The moral dictates and cost of incompetence cited by General Mattis thus apply equally to both professions." (Murray and Sinnreich 2006: 11)

There is much still to do in the PME education space in all the countries that I have discussed, and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq will require in-depth assessment in the years to come, as will the reform efforts of the militaries involved. While there has been positive movement to deal with some of the pre-2001 shortcomings, the debates will continue and lessons remain to be identified to prepare our nations' militaries for the uncertainties of the future.

The Author: Daniel Marston, MA (McGill), DPhil (Oxon), FRHistS, is Principal of the Military and Defence Studies Programme at the Australian Command and Staff College and Professor of Military Studies in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University. Earlier, he held the Ike Skelton Distinguished Chair of the Art of War at the United States Army Command and General Staff College. He has been a visiting fellow with the Leverhulme Changing Character of War Programme at the University of Oxford; and a senior lecturer in war studies at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. His research focuses on how armies learn and reform; and, since 2006, he has worked in Afghanistan and Iraq with the United States and British militaries. He is the author or editor of some 22 research papers, book chapters and books. [Photo of Professor Marston: the author]

References

- Howard, Michael (1962). The use and abuse of military history. *Royal United Services Institution Journal* **107**, 4 – 10.
- Murray, W., and Sinnreich, R. H., eds. (2006). *The past as prologue: the importance of history to the military profession* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

³The Fort Leavenworth Art of War programme used eight of the nine themes. We did not use joint operational planning in the United States.

⁴The Military and Defence Studies Programme and Art of War programmes won the college and the university 'best programme' awards at ANU in 2016.

⁵An Australian Army major and member of the first Australian Command and Staff College Art of War cohort.