

Can history, science of the past,

help to prepare for the future ?

At Bull Run¹ on July 21, 1861 occurred the first large-scale confrontation between the 32 500 soldiers of the Confederate State Army under command of Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard and the 35 000 men of Irvin McDowell, commanding the main Army of the Union (*United States Army*). A confused combat took place, in which the Union soldiers, after a good start, were confronted to a fierce resistance². The end of the day was followed by an epic headlong flight of the Yankees towards Washington while the Confederates were controlling the terrain. The battle is not very interesting to study as such. It remains generally confuse, and had little incidence on the following military events³. On the other hand, Bull Run is the application of the existence of one synergy between doctrine and military training or to be more precise between the military history teaching and the implementation of an operation. In order to be convinced by this fact, one has just to look at the personality of the two commanders-in-chief. McDowell and Beauregard shared a common culture and education. Both belonged to the same West Point promotion (*ending in 1838*), and both were fervent admirers of Napoleon. McDowell had spent part of his youth in France, and had made his career in artillery whilst Beauregard cherished his French ancestors and studied during entire nights Napoleonic tactical plans⁴.

From a military standpoint, the two soldiers were aiming at the same goal : destroying the enemy in a major engagement. Heirs of the ideas spread by the military thinkers at the end of the XVIIIth century and at the beginning of the XIXth - Frederic of Prussia, Guibert and Jomini amongst others - they were looking for the decisive battle during which the enemy would be destroyed and from which peace would be quickly set up. Their knowledge of the Napoleonic wars gave them the best possible example : the battle of Austerlitz⁵, where Napoleon, sweeping aside the third coalition, obtained peace a few days later⁶.

BY 2ND LIEUTENANT (RETIRED) LASCONJARIAS, RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF THE CDES

The knowledge of history then seems to be at the heart of a paradox : the military commander must have strong notions in this field in order to draw options from a catalog of available examples and at the same time he has to be able to develop an original thinking. In fact, neither Beauregard, nor a fortiori McDowell, were able to implement a “*perfect plan*”. In this way and forgetting their illustrious model, they did not

have the intelligence to “*shape*” their plans. This example incidentally also proves that the Bonaparte sentence (“*Woe to the general who arrives on the battlefield with a system !*”) is still very topical.

The knowledge of important campaigns and of several classical battles is however necessary and is part of the education of any officer, whether at Military School or at each step of his

career. General tactical courses are one of the best examples : these historical foundations allow as well intellectual emulation as improving the mind of the “*tactic-student*”. Once again recently, the students of the 116th course of the Higher Staff Course went to Verdun, one of the famous battlefields of the confrontation during WWI⁷. History is thus perceived as a science of the past, but its study permits to better understand the present⁸. And the way in which it is taught is expressed in the implemented doctrine corpus.

But why not coming back to an issue, already mentioned by Foch when he was teaching at the War College at the beginning of the 1910s. What lessons can be drawn from History ? Is it possible to start from “*common sense*”, which states that nobody makes the same mistakes twice ? Of course this question might seem rhetorical, if we are indulgent, or irrelevant, if less indulgent. But it is the issue of the doctrine validity that comes then into play. On the account of the implementation of a new model employed in an empirical way for the first time, and then many times successfully, one can

quote the case of the “*great Napoleonic battery*”. On July 14. 1807, at Friedland, the future marshal Victor is deploying forward through successive positions his artillery, commanded by general Senarmont. The gunners break the Russian attacks and undoubtedly ensure the victory. Later, this “*great battery*” is deployed successfully at Wagram (July 5. 1809) where it works splendidly against the Austrians. From an empirical innovation dictated by the situation, we switch to a concept that becomes later one of the three war principles of Foch : the concentration of efforts.

Two other historical examples come to mind, which reinforce the idea according to we learn from one’s lessons only if later we know how to adapt to the circumstances. The first one concerns the battle of Poitiers in 1356. France is then in the first phase of the One Hundred Years War. Ten years before, in 1346, the French knights were heavily defeated at Crécy. But, during this day of September 18. 1356, king Jean II holds an ideal position, as he encircles his English enemy who is entrenched on a lightly wooden hill. Far from repeating the mistakes of Crécy, where the French knights had charged

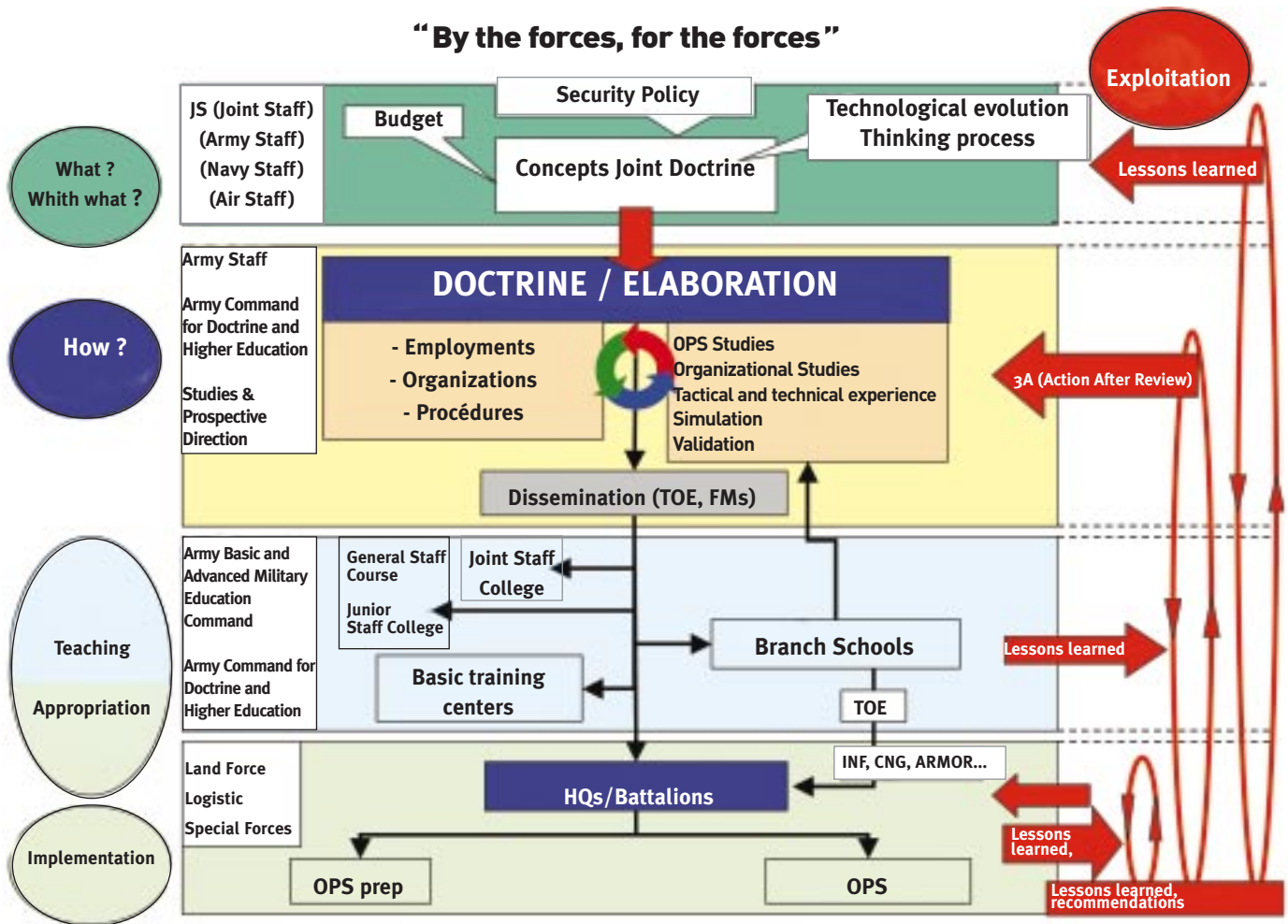
Visit of the CSEM (Higher Staff Course) in VERDUN



Gilles ZINDY/CDES

Land forces doctrine

“By the forces, for the forces”



disorderly without taking any rest, the king decides to wait until the next day, September 19 to attack. Along the same line, he decides to have this French chivalry combating on foot, as ten years before mud had forbidden cavalry movements. It rapidly turns out during the course of the battle that this idea of not reiterating a past mistake leads on the contrary to the defeat of Poitiers. The chivalry does not have the necessary power to break through English troops and soon the combat turns to the advantage of the English.

The second example is more recent : it is the case of Stalingrad, but could very well applied to Dien Bien Phu. In both cases it concerns a pocket (in German the exact term is Kessel, cauldron) that one had decided to kept right into the enemy layout, provided that there will be a

significant air support. But, and here again, in 1943 as well as in 1954, this implementation of a plan is related to a recent very successful experience⁹.

In all these cases, the implementation stricto sensu of the doctrine after a successful past experience shows its limits. What can History bring to doctrine if its limits are so easily reached ?

The word of the poet Paul Valéry possibly gives us an answer : “*The very tradition is not to do again what others have done, but to find the spirit that has accomplished these great things and that would have achieved very different ones in other times*”. Thus, it would be useful to come back to what Foch used to say ; during his lessons at the War College the future marshal invited his students to carry out real mental

The word of the poet Paul Valéry possibly gives us an answer : “The very tradition is not to do again what others have done, but to find the spirit that has accomplished these great things and that would have achieved very different ones in other times”.

gymnastics where history provided, at a given time and location, real cases from which “a theory and a doctrine¹⁰” could be drawn. Today, the emergence and the setting up of new centers show the interest for lessons of the past (similarly to the CEREX¹¹ and the CRD¹²). In fact these centers try to extend the result of their thinking through a larger analysis. Both of these centers are also integrated into different stages of the doctrinal¹³ cycle. It could then be possible to solve these issues by preparing some officers with a specific knowledge in history during their training. This joke highlights a fact that is already implemented : the enlistment of officers under contract or of reserve officers who have these qualities. In fact, the historian education compels him to adopt a critical distance in face of events but also in face of documents and sources he has to analyze.

To conclude, the use - and the place - of History is twofold. As a high-level intellectual exercise, it is taught to give future military commander some examples, but also lessons.

This teaching, when being well understood, becomes a reasoning method which applications may be used to give birth not to a doctrine, but at least to an evolving system, i.e. able to adapt, progress and improve in order to reach the utmost efficiency. This twofold perspective turns the historian into an aide to the soldier and the soldier into a player of history. But the relationship between both of them may be tense ; the critical eye of the historian and his vision - if not out of reality, but at least external - cannot always be in agreement with the requirements of the one who acts.

- 1 Bull Run is a small brook located at around forty kilometers at the South-West of Washington. It should be noted that for Civil War battles, the Confederates name a battle according to the name of the closest town whilst generally the Yankees use the name of a river. This is the case for Bull Run, that the Confederates call Manassas, drawn from the name of a railway station (Manassas Junction).
- 2 For the record, it should be noted that one of the best South generals, brigadier Thomas Jackson has won his nickname of “Stonewall” during this battle.
- 3 Except by the fact that this confrontation made roughly 5000 killed or wounded and had a tremendous psychological impact on minds, breaking the illusion of a short war.
- 4 John Macdonald, *Great Battles of the Civil War*, Macmillan, New York, 1992, p. 13 and after.
- 5 December 2. 1805.
- 6 The peace of Presbourg is only signed on December 26. 1805, but an armistice had been granted as soon as December 5.
- 7 “La Quinzaine”, internal information and communication letter of the CDES, n° 92, April 5. 2003, p. 4.
- 8 Let’s quote Goethe : “who does not know how to draw lessons from 3 000 years of history only lives day to day”
- 9 From January to May 1942, the Germans had been able to support, thanks to a continuous airlift, 96000 men encircled in a resistance pocket in the area of Demiansk, close to Leningrad.
- 10 According to André Martel, “Foch, war or battle ?” Battle from yesterday up to today, Minutes of the symposium of the Military History International, RIHM n° 78, 1998, p.123-130.
- 11 The Army lessons learned center, commanded by colonel Maes, is the organization dedicated to lead the lessons learnt function within the French Army. Its mission consists in drawing lessons from overseas operations and major exercises in order to further feed the doctrine.
- 12 At the separation between the military and university worlds, the research and documentation center headed by colonel Chauvancy participates in the elaboration of the doctrine thanks to studies on several topics whose contributions are necessary for the centers of the CDES.
- 13 See in annex the doctrinal cycle process.