

Front & Center

The Rewards of Reading in the Profession of Arms

By GEN Gordon R. Sullivan
U.S. Army retired

The Army is experiencing a transition in leadership. It is apparent from GEN Martin E. Dempsey's recent articles and speeches that one focus of his command as the 37th Chief of Staff of the Army will be a reexamination of the Army as a profession and of ways to expand the skills and knowledge of

the soldier. In connection with a look at the Army as a profession, a renewed emphasis on professional reading has also been a recurring subject of recent issues of this magazine.

Our first commander in chief, George Washington, established the practice of learning soldiering by observation and application of a knowledge enhanced from books, then from drill on the village green and finally in

battle in two wars. His broad reading gave him a sense of strategic vision, a political view that affects us to this day and a military victory that changed the world. A man of curiosity, courage, self-education, imagination and practicality, Washington approached any endeavor with a foundation in knowledge gleaned from what he read.

For Washington, like so many soldiers before and since, an essential exercise for those who practice the profession of arms is reading.

Why read? What does this do for soldiers today? After all, duty is demanding, dwell time precious, time with family and friends essential, and there is little time to spare. The Army is not a book-of-the-month club, though book lists both recommended and "required" have flourished in service schools, major commands and for the Chief of Staff himself. Lists, however, are ephemeral, so rather than another list, I offer reasons to read in order to tailor your own professional life and your personal one, as one enriches the other.

Knowledge is obviously essential for participation in the modern world, and reading is the standard educational tool with which we acquire large amounts of information. At no time in history has the volume of information available to the human race been as accessible as it is today, nor as essential. Similarly, competition for our attention has never been greater—be it "social networking" or "working out," like it or not, we are a nation of multitaskers, and nowhere is this so true as in our military.

Reading teaches conceptual analysis, offers insights to ponder, and expands both the imagination and the potential of the mind. As a building block exer-

GENERAL M. B. RIDGWAY
918 WALDHEIM ROAD W., FOX CHAPEL
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA 15215

30 Jan 82.

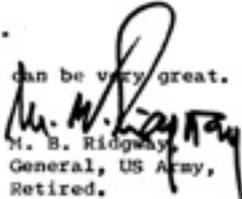
The formative years of one's life are rich fields for future growth. They pass quickly, but while one has them, they offer boundless opportunities for preparation for the challenges which will surely come.

Into those years even the most privileged can crowd but a few personal experiences, and experiences are the great teachers.

So the answer is to draw on the boundless experiences of others. With good fortune you may have opportunities to know men and women of stature - those who have had great experience. Draw directly from them all you can, and tuck it away for future use.

Such opportunities will be few, but the opportunities to learn of such experiences are unlimited. They lie in the pages of histories, biographies, and the records of those who have gone before you - the records of great successes and great failures of great men and great women, who with the vision to see, the wisdom to choose, and the moral courage to act, reached the heights.

So read, read, READ. The rewards can be very great.


M. B. Ridgway,
General, US Army,
Retired.

This letter from GEN Matthew B. Ridgway served as a foreword to a book on leadership readings.

cise, reading brings with it the implied task that knowledge must be updated as the world learns more. Most of this information, whether for professional or personal education—and, indeed, pleasure—is self-reinforcing, provided a sound base was established at the outset. But the beauty of reading is that it empowers, and one can always catch up by both broadening and sharpening one’s focus. True professionals have a library not simply focused on their own profession but containing works that expand horizons, refresh the spirit and challenge the mind. Curiosity is the hallmark of a learner, and diligence in application of knowledge is the hallmark of a professional.

Leadership and command require maturity and wisdom that come not only from training, application and observation, but often from a wide range of reading on the basic topics that affect everyone: current events, technological advances, the lives of others (biography and memoir) and histories that teach about what has gone before. It is, as it were, a staff ride of the mind, directing both the officer and the NCO—and ultimately the troops they lead—on a path to the future. Professionals should be well-rounded and acquire the cultural and educational tone necessary to operate in more sophisticated environments with foreign nationals, government agencies and individuals outside the profession. A genuine interest in the arts, literature and the sciences pays dividends not merely in polite discourse but in having a larger perspective, a must for senior officers.

Some years ago, GEN Matthew B. Ridgway was asked by a young Reserve Officers’ Training Corps instructor to write a foreword to a book on leadership readings. GEN Ridgway responded with a letter that explains why reading is essential.

I believe that GEN Ridgway’s words eloquently distill the riches of lifelong reading. The rewards, indeed, can be very great. □

GEN Gordon R. Sullivan, USA Ret., is President of AUSA and former Chief of Staff of the Army.