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## *Why Study the Literature of War?*

**M**ANY YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS A LIEUTENANT assigned to the 552nd AWACS Wing at Tinker AFB, OK, I found myself pulling alert duty—a rather joyless task unless you were “scrambled,” i.e., sent out after USSR aircraft violating U.S. airspace. Otherwise, spending a week on alert was akin to what I imagined to be time spent in a medium security prison. As I and another lieutenant were checking out the alert facility, we discovered a library—a conspicuous feature of which was the Encyclopedia Britannica’s *Great Books of the Western World* set. The room was well stocked with quality books and publications—something that surprised in much the same way as if I had entered a cement plant and, taking a look at the lunchroom, had discovered a string quartet playing Beethoven’s *Opus 132*. The other lieutenant, mimicking me, pulled a volume off the shelf—I believe the pages his eyes traversed were from Virgil’s *The Eclogues*—and declared, “Hey, poetry . . . I get it, ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb and sh\_t!’” Memory chivalrously cannot recall whether or not the lieutenant was a graduate of the Air Force Academy. It’s at once a funny and sad thing that books did not figure largely in the life of my fellow lieutenant. Twenty-two years in the Air Force tells me that he is hardly unique among officers.

We’re here to talk about the value of war literature. Here’s an excerpt from the *USAF Doctrine on Leadership*, the section’s subheading is “Force Development Construct,” which in its own clumsily ironic way is instructive:

The need for Airmen, military and civilian, who possess the right occupational skill sets and enduring leadership competencies forms the core of force development and is the basis for all force development efforts. The

goal of force development is to prepare Airmen to successfully lead and act in the midst of rapidly evolving environments, while meeting their personal and professional expectations. The construct, as depicted in figure 2.1.1....

Incredibly—i.e., in defiance of probability—this watery porridge of counterfeits and canards is meant to guide those whose principal duty is, ultimately, to provide strategic advice to civilian authority. By the lights of such a wayward and dissolute understanding, war—in its essence a trial of strength between character and circumstance—is reduced to an irregularity that can be subdued by mechanical wizardry and its unthinking, implacable handmaiden: procedural hygiene. Of course, recent history and current events prove that such a point of view is a self-injurious conceit. Even so, we continue to soldier on as before—bringing to mind Talleyrand’s remark about the Bourbons after they returned to power: “Learned Nothing, Forgotten Nothing.”

The authors of the *USAF Leadership Doctrine* give no evidence that they’ve read anything other than technical manuals and magazine advertisements. So, naturally enough, it would be tempting to react to the grandiloquent murk on display here by recommending that Air Force officers in particular read the literature of war—most especially during a time of war—if only to help them come to terms with the fact that war is, at heart, the most intense form of social interaction and not merely a technical or managerial puzzle. Unfortunately, by the time an officer reaches mid-career, the form of his judgment has most likely petrified to the extent that writing of the kind I just read comes across as purposive, illuminating, and comprehensive. That’s why the study of war literature—history, biography, memoir, fiction—should figure much more prominently than it does now in service academy curricula.

By studying the literature of war our students cultivate—or at least we make it possible for them to cultivate—an irritable impatience with slovenly or otherwise irresponsible thought, whether it comes from their pen or someone else’s. We want our students to appreciate reading and writing as a species of truth-seeking upon which their professional judgment must pivot, and not as an exotic and so dispensable pastime—like keeping a reptile farm—or, worse yet, as a means of sending forth low ambition dressed up as high principle; grubby self-seeking in masquerade as dutifulness or profundity. Put another way, what we desire for our cadets—and we organize our professional lives around consummating that desire—is that they become wise adjudicators of moral and intellectual excellence in its various professional forms.

*Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families* (Random House, 2006), which is required-

reading for all students enrolled in our capstone core English course, is an anthology of first-hand accounts from the current conflict that our cadets find engrossing. The piece, “Day of the Dragon,” vivifies in ways that starchy publications on leadership never can the ultimate test of officership: have you prepared yourself to rehabilitate the morale of your troops after a brutal and demoralizing setback?”

In this story, Air Force Captain Robert Lindblom takes charge of a Helicopter Rescue detachment after the unit commander and several other squadron mates are killed while trying to transport two injured Afghan children from their isolated villages to hospital. Captain Lindblom draws on hitherto latent moral strength—which is animated by speech—that helps him and his fellow servicemen to perceive nobility in a circumstance that strikes all of them at first as the perversity, injustice and caprice of inscrutable fate. What makes Lindblom’s story—and other estimable examples of war literature—indispensable is that it sets before cadets subjects that are genuinely worthy of emulation—something that is all the more critical given that we, as an institution, often purvey an ersatz version of this commendable idea in which all human frailty is airbrushed out: the shimmering, remote abstraction of the class exemplar; the compound of rhetorical yeast, whey, and sugar peddled by the life coach; and the “how I did it” gasconade of the guest speaker.

Another illuminating story is “The Smell of Fresh Paint.” Here, Sgt Tina Beller reflects on surviving a mortar attack in the Green Zone, during which she sought to help the wounded but was later threatened with an official reprimand for not searching out and donning protective equipment first. Beller’s narrative, like the others in *Operation Homecoming*, underscores our misbegotten idolatry of “soundness,” i.e., our belief that the zero-defect outlook of the professional systems analyst, aided by the charismatic hand of technology, can domesticate war.

Beller’s story provides an opportunity for our students to dilate upon what is at heart a moral point: that regulations and policy are means to an end, and not an end to themselves. The conventional understanding of the ideal cadet—what we like to think of as the perfect officer in gestation—is an avatar of conformity: one who never questions decisions handed down from above and whose desiderata is to harmonize his outlook with that of the status quo. The highest praise that can be bestowed on such a person is that as he progresses in rank he will reliably oppose the infiltration of “unsafe”—i.e., reforming—ideas. Not that such a person will ever be inert, of course not, especially given that we have transfigured “bustle” into a sacramental obligation. But what passes for boldness is often gussied up marketing zeal—bewitching organizational charts embellished by slogans freighted with meaninglessness. Such a person spends his professional life embracing the mind of the boss and acting accordingly, even though this manner of proceeding is a solvent to independent judgment and intelligent initiative. Not surprisingly, officers who embody this outlook never can bring themselves to ask, “is what I’m doing the

right thing?” Rather, they reflexively ask, “how will this make me look?” This is an insidious menace, because it is clear that the problems besetting the Air Force in particular are moral and intellectual rather than technical and managerial.

To sum up: Motivated no doubt by the best of intentions, the Air Force—and perhaps this is true in varying degrees for the other military departments—strives to produce technically and administratively proficient drones: officers adept at transacting business rapidly—dependable implements of a great system from whom not much more is expected beyond the ability to demonstrate and reward efficiency and to despise and shun inefficiency. But the literature of war—which should be the foundation of our collective professional conscience and the prime minister of our judgment—tells us that we should demand so much more of ourselves. Officership has come to denote “technician/administrator,” when the term should signify, “resolution in the service of sound judgment.” Today more so than ever before, studying the literature of war is, I believe, the principal—though certainly not the only—way of achieving what remains a noble end that has been consecrated by time.



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