



By Vincent A. Dueñas

In his treatise, [*Why Don't We Learn from History*](#), B.H. Liddell Hart opens the first chapter with a general discussion of history and its merit. In describing the advancements of the conduct of warfare over the course of history he takes aim at the concept of direct vs indirect experience, just as Bismarck did with the aphorism: "I want to learn through others' experiences..." Hart posits that indirect experience is the best way to advance the theory and conduct of warfare. However, direct experience results in otherwise unattainable insights that would be missed by simply relying on indirect experiences. Service as a Soldier

offers the kind of direct experience that can advance theory and conduct of warfare if leveraged properly. Practitioners, such as Soldiers, gain direct experience and are then able to facilitate understanding and dialogue about said experiences. For practitioners, however, indirect experience is fundamental and it should occur sequentially for the individual, after direct learning, vice concurrently.

General knowledge is improved when all ideas present themselves and the best can be shaken out – as Ray Dalio’s [Principles](#) emphasize – and Soldiers can capitalize on their direct experiences to enrich the learning experience. The first step is to keep handwritten notes using a [\(green\) notebook](#), and that is the best way I know to do this, officer and [enlisted perspectives](#) included. It is important to have a framework for your ideas and to consider how they might grow from direct experience to something you might share about the true nature of warfare. Pursue your curiosity in other disciplines before putting all of your thoughts in order and have someone review and challenge them.

Keeping Notes

Log your first-hand (i.e. direct) experiences in order to understand your decision-making processes and their outcomes. Always remain mindful of operational security while recording valuable insights into how you process information. Use this raw data to understand your personal efficacy. It does you no justice to lie to yourself, be blunt. The papers, actions, and decisions you produce are a snapshot in time of how you process information. Key experiences at the direct level include your interactions with peers and subordinates. In a simple example, a Soldier that perpetually cannot wake up on his own and make it to formation on time might become a snapshot of a lack of discipline. Without self-reflection, you may immediately assume the Soldier is a dirt-bag. You might otherwise conclude that something is definitely wrong, but acknowledge that it may be the symptom of a much larger problem. Either way, write it down for later recall.

Expand your Aperture

The raw data of your experiences that you accumulate will serve as the foundation from which you draw your general conclusions about how the military and warfare works. If you read and expand your aperture you will begin to see that themes from the military apply to civilian life and that themes from other domains, such as physics, apply to the military. These themes are sometimes described as [mental models](#). They are the frameworks that describe how the world generally works. Exposing yourself to mental models outside of the military provides perspective into how your own domain works. [Newton's first rule of motion](#) states that an object at rest will remain at rest unless it is changed by an external force. This concept brings to mind the idea that leaders affect change only when something is a priority like a maxim taught to company-grade leaders: "Expect what you inspect." As you review your past decisions you will begin to see macro trends in either your own decision-making processes or the organizations you have worked in. These macro trends are already in your subconscious, which becomes evident in the biases we each have about simple things. We all catalog these ideas in our heads, but we do not necessarily write them out when we should.

Putting it all together

Returning to Hart, the thinker writing about war may conceptually understand why discipline is important, but the thinker-practitioner will have a visceral emotion about a unit that keeps having the same type of Soldier issues and what that means for readiness, training, and efficacy on the battlefield. In the example of the Soldier who does not show up to formation on time, you may learn through multiple assignments, and exposure to other domains, that persistent examples of Soldiers who fail basic tasks indicates deeper leadership and cultural issues in the organization, which in turn leads you to a framework for what a good unit looks like and what it needs to prioritize at the basic levels. This is why it is so important for military members to contribute to professional discourse. The pure thinker sees things that pure practitioners cannot because they are only observing and

trying to explain them, which offers only one, albeit very important perspective. The practitioner, on the other hand, is only focused on the task at hand and may not have the luxury of integrating heady concepts into everyday tasks. The thinker-practitioner, on the other hand, has access to the other side of the coin, what the thinker is trying to explain. The key is to be mindful of when you are focused on experiencing events, as opposed to when you are reflecting on them, and to make sure that you are writing them down.

Give yourself a mental break and focus on your immediate assignment, but take notes. When you are at some school, put it all together and create something that makes sense to you. Submit it to an outlet and contribute your knowledge. It is essential to improving the military profession and providing further value to our experiences and commemorating the lessons you learned with the ones who sacrificed their lives in this endeavor. Write as a thinker-practitioner.

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