



By Joe Byerly

As Army leaders, we are always looking for leadership nuggets to help us excel in our organizations. So, imagine having the opportunity to sit across the table and listen to stories of people who shaped history in arts, sciences, sports and world affairs.

Think about the lessons we would glean by hearing about their triumphs and failures, things they learned along the way, and the world in which they accomplished those feats.

While few (if any) of us may ever get this opportunity, there's another avenue available to learn some of these same lessons—reading a biography. This is a genre of literature I've only recently discovered and wish I had sooner.

As I look back at biographies I've read in the past few years, I learned important lessons from people (many who never served a day in a military uniform) who directly influenced me as an Army leader. I learned the value of keeping a notebook from [Leonardo da Vinci](#). I learned about cultivating a strong organizational culture with a bias toward action from [Adm. Horatio Nelson](#). I learned about the importance of focusing on the task at hand and not letting the totality of events overwhelm me from football coach [Nick Saban](#). And I learned the importance of self-development from [Gens. George Marshall, George Patton Jr. and Dwight Eisenhower](#).

I recognize that each of us approaches books with [our own mental models](#), and the lessons you take away may be different than the ones I absorb. But regardless of past experiences

or education level, all of us can learn the following three lessons when we pick up a good biography.

Life Is Messy

Too many of us lose hours each day looking at the “perfect” lives of our friends and family courtesy of Instagram filters or Facebook feeds. And we try to measure ourselves against these manicured glimpses. A better use of our time would be to learn about others through a more realistic image of life.

Even career and life advice provided by mentors or higher-ranking Army leaders is not without a similar “filter.” In telling others our life stories or providing career advice, we tend to round off the edges and fit our past into nicely packaged narratives that may leave out ugly parts as important as the scenes from the highlights reel.

A good biography offers a holistic view of the lives of people who accomplished greatness. They had good days and really bad ones, too. Many of those who left their mark on history had tough lives. They faced divorce, death of children or a spouse, public ostracism and career setbacks. In every biography I’ve read, the subject faced some type of serious adversity. And several succeeded because of their struggles, not in spite of them.

In reading about the lives of others, we also learn not to confuse the trappings of success with the path itself. So many of history’s greatest artists, military leaders, statesmen and athletes spent boring and tedious hours perfecting their craft. They didn’t adopt the latest life hack or scheme to short-circuit the process of mastery—they embraced it.

There’s Always a Trade-off

An important lesson I gleaned from biographies is there is no such thing as balance in life. Our time is a zero sum game, and there is always a trade-off.

Every person I read about traded something for their achievements. As author [Todd Henry](#) writes, “You cannot pursue greatness and comfort at the same time.” They left comfort and certainty behind to pursue passions that gave them the opportunity to leave their mark and blaze new paths.

Many closed doors to walk through a single door. Others traded in their marriages, or relationships with their children. And some recognized when it was time to move on, giving up further success to be with their families or to adopt a quiet life.

In reading their stories, we can reflect on our own lives and better determine what we think is important. Too often, we take this for granted. Many Army leaders go through their careers trying to keep multiple doors open or achieve an impossible balance between personal and professional lives. Over time, I have learned that if we don't prioritize our lives, others will.

Context Matters

In reading biographies, we learn that the time period, social institutions and relationship networks play an important role in determining the outcome of a venture. Sometimes, they play a more important role than a single person's leadership abilities.

Retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal echoes this in his recent co-authored book, [*Leaders: Myth and Reality*](#), in which he writes that great leadership emerges "from the interaction of a wide range of constantly shifting variables that include far more than the individual leader." In other words, the context matters.

Would we have a Gen. Ulysses Grant without a Maj. Gen. George McClellan during the American Civil War, or a British Prime Minister Winston Churchill without World War II? Would Eisenhower have been Supreme Allied Commander if Maj. Gen. Fox Conner hadn't intervened in his career as a major? Probably not.

In observing these lessons, we become more sensitive to the role of context in our lives. Because when we fail to reflect on the sources of our success and failures, we run the risk of committing fundamental attribution error. When things are going well, we tend to attribute success to our own competence, leadership style or system. We discount the role other factors play in the outcome, to include [chance, our networks and timing](#). This blinds us to our weaknesses, and we then fail to address areas where we need improvement, which could prove fatal as we move further along in our Army careers. Finally, in reflecting on context, we are better equipped to quiet the voice of our egos that want to take credit for our successes and not for our failures.

Timeless Insights

Regardless of the time period or the subject, biographies are an invaluable source for Army leaders and teach us about being human. Many of their lessons are timeless and can provide us with insights needed to address challenges we face today.

Biographies provide a window into which we can view the messy and complicated lives of people who made a difference. When we study those who came before us, we begin to reflect on traits we want to develop in ourselves and identify the steps we need to get there.

Read On

Here are some excellent biographies that can give Army leaders a good start in the genre.

- [***Nelson: Britannia's God of War***](#) by Andrew Lambert is an excellent case study in how leaders can develop a culture of Mission Command in their organizations.
- [***Generals in the Making: How Marshall, Eisenhower, Patton, and Their Peers Became the Commanders Who Won World War II***](#) by Benjamin Runkle gives the good, the bad and the ugly from the lives of our World War II generals.
- [***Leadership: In Turbulent Times***](#) by Doris Kearns Goodwin covers the lives of presidents who led during periods of U.S. history when the country could have been forever torn apart.
- [***Leonardo da Vinci***](#) by Walter Isaacson is an enjoyable biography of one of history's most famous artists.
- [***Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant***](#) by Ulysses Grant delivers great insights into command during conflict from a man who understood how his battles translated into a political victory.
- [***Churchill: A Study in Failure, 1900-1939***](#) by Robert Rhodes James shows that though Sir Winston Churchill made mistakes throughout his professional career, they set the stage for his leadership during World War II.

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