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Stranger in a Strange Land: A Regular Army Colonel and Military History

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I have read with keen interest the excellent *Strategic Visions* articles by Mr. Jason Smith and Mr. (former USMC Staff NCO) Earl J. Catagnus, Jr., presented, respectively, in the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 editions of *Strategic Visions*. Their musings about the relative importance of actual military service for the military historian prompted me to consider this question in the context of my experiences as a U.S. Army officer and as a fledgling professional historian.

Today, after more than thirty-two years of service, I am a colonel in the Regular Army assigned as a full-time faculty instructor at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and, simultaneously, a Ph.D. student in military history here at Temple. Having not set foot in a civilian classroom since 1990, and holding no degree in history, this is indeed an odd place to find myself. To borrow Robert A. Heinlein's famous 1961 science fiction title, I am *A Stranger in a Strange Land*. Strange not because I am unused to professional education; in fact, I have attended several year-long degree-awarding military schools over the years. Neither is it strange because of my taking up a new field of endeavor; I have read and studied, both personally and professionally, military history my whole life. Rather, this land is strange because my fellow students are reading about and trying to imagine actions and situations that are often, but not always, part of the very fabric of my life.

Now, to deflect the inevitable accusations of egoism and pomposity, let me quickly say that this is simply a statement of fact – as struggling students we are all equal, regardless of the path that brought us here, and I make no claim to superiority. But therein lays the question. What advantage, if any, does being in the military offer to the military historian?

Mr. Smith would have you believe the answer is “none” or at least “not much.” In his article he states, “The historian with military experience is not more eminently qualified than the civilian. . . . Ultimately, life in the modern American military hardly resembles life at Fort Leavenworth in 1850, or on Asiatic Station in 1880. The Past is a foreign battlefield to all historians, military and civilian alike.” In some ways, mostly technical, I would agree with this assessment, but in others I simply cannot; and here, I believe, I agree with Mr. Catagnus. There are experiences and challenges of military service that transcend time and place: making life-and-death decisions in the midst of uncertainty and chaos, leadership that carries men forward from safety and comfort into danger and death, the crushing agony of the death of friends under your command, the exhilaration of battlefield success against a wily and dedicated foe, and the loneliness of stern

duty in faraway lands. All of these and more are the lot of soldiers and their leaders from antiquity to today. Having lived the life of a soldier, I can more fully understand soldiers and soldiering, and the accounts of the past speak to me with an eloquence and passion that others may not fully hear or comprehend.

Does this make me, or any long-serving soldier, a better historian? Perhaps it does, but not in ways that one might think. I humbly submit that I do have an extraordinary empathy with history's soldiers and I also quickly, almost intuitively, grasp the essentials of the military activity documented in the historical record. Yet how much of this is related to my military service or is a direct result of a lifelong study of military history is unclear. This is the tricky part; almost a "Chicken or the Egg" sort of question. Am I attuned to the complexity and nuances of military history because of my service, or because of a lifetime of study? This is the crux of the issue, for if it is due to study, then anyone could attain this same sensitivity and understanding. However, if it is due to service, then the civilian historian is permanently denied these same attributes. I believe the former is the case. I have never served on a submarine, but I understand the technical fundamentals of diesel submarines and the tactical, operational, and strategic aspects of submarine warfare. Could I write convincingly about submarine warfare? Certainly. Could I write intimately about being a submariner? No. Here I am in complete agreement with Mr. Smith and Mr. Catagnus regarding relevancy of experience and Mr. Smith's unwritten admonition that writers must not lay claim to expertise that is not theirs to command. Amen!

But should uninitiated civilians presume to write military history? Absolutely. For 95 percent of the history written, no intimate insider knowledge is required and, as do Mr. Smith and Mr. Catagnus, I see the very real value in multiple points of view and multiple interpretations grounded in different life experiences. In this way, the lack of experience that seems to trouble Mr. Smith is simply the result of a separate path to the same place and for which diligent study will largely close the gap. If military history were only written by military authors, we would all be poorer for it.

I applaud both Mr. Smith and Mr. Catagnus for questioning the proper placement of experience in the skill sets of historians and in critically evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of both a civilian's and a veteran's approach to military history. Through such introspection and self assessment we grow stronger as professional historians, and provide a more finely balanced perspective to a public hungry for real history.

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