Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- The Guns of August Discussion Guide –

This guide is intended to help the readers synthesize an understanding of the causes of World War I based on allied political obligations and military plans, how military planning drove initial operations and how operations in turn altered the initial plans. This 600 page book is divided into three components, each a base for reading assignments and discussions. Appropriate headings for those assignments/discussions:

I - Political & Military Planning for War
II - Opening Operations and Alterations of Initial Plans
III – Battle Operations Leading to Stalemate on the Western Front

Assignment/Discussion for I –
Political & Military Planning

Prep Work: Read Chapters 2-5, pp. 21-81 [60 pages]

Overview: Chapter 2 provides an overview of the German Schlieffen Plan to defeat France in a large, but short decisive engagement. The plan assumed a two-front war against France and Russia. As France would mobilize faster with forces positioned on the German border, one German force would allow French forces to advance into Germany a modest distance, while the majority of German forces would pass through neutral Belgium to sweep around the French Army and Paris bringing about French capitulation. With the French defeated, the German Army would send forces to fight Russia and defeat it. Chapter 3 provides an overview of French operational plans with its armies aligned on the border with Germany with the assumption that Germany would not violate Belgian neutrality. Chapter 4 provides an overview of British political and military preparations based on an obligation to guarantee Belgian neutrality and otherwise assist France in preventing German hegemony in Europe. Chapter 5 addresses the Russian situation and its lack of modernization.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the original plan designed by General Schlieffen and how it was altered by subsequent German military leaders.

Key Take-Away: The original premise of a plan, i.e. keeping the right strong at the expense of the center and left, required a full understanding of the original object and the risks necessary to make it work. Subsequent efforts to mitigate the risk to the German center and left ended up degrading the German right and the capacity to achieve the overall objective.

2. Describe Plan 17 for the French and the forces that drove it when the object of the plan was unclear with no particular resolution in mind.
Key Take-Away: The French plan was based on the spirit of the offense with a callous disregard for economy of force or defensive measures. The object to advance into German occupied territory lacked a clear military and political objective.

3. Describe the British plans to defend a violation of Belgian neutrality and to otherwise assist France contain a militant Germany.

Key Take-Away: British goals were altruistic with plans far less developed or resourced compared to German and French plans.

4. Describe Belgian defensive plans.

Key Take-Away: Belgium assumed its neutrality alone was the primary basis for defense, thus when it was apparent Germany would invade to get to France from the north, it was ill prepared for war and resistance led to losses in terms of casualties and sovereignty.

5. Describe Russian plans.

Key Take-Away: Russia had a large standing army and a large population with which to expand it, but it lacked the modern weapons and munitions to sustain its army and project it quickly. It also required more time to close on German forces.

To the Discussion Leader:

Encourage those studying this material to focus on the planning effort of each country and how military plans aligned (or failed to align) with political objectives. Avoid moving forward to discuss military operations unless all participants have read the material covering military operations.

Assignment/Discussion for II – Opening Operations and Alterations of Initial Plans

Prep Work: Read Chapters 6-9, pp. 85-158 [74 pages]

Overview: These chapters describe the opening operations in August 1914. Germany invaded Belgium and overcame the limited defense at the cost of precious time. The French advanced against the German border, but opposing German forces held them rather than allowing the French to move into Germany territory. Britain hesitated with the deployment of their army to France, which delayed the British contribution. France was initially reluctant to acknowledge that the main German effort was through Belgium, but eventually shifted forces to join the British and Belgian forces to slow German operations. All of the plans encountered political and military friction. The effort of political leaders to avoid the war was seriously complicated by military time tables that allowed little time for discussion or diplomatic solution.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the execution of the German plans. What was the impact of changes from Schlieffen’s original plan? What assumptions were incorrect?

Key Take-Away: The German right wing was strong, but not as strong as Schlieffen had required. The assumption that Belgium would passively allow German forces to through proved incorrect.
2. Describe the execution of the French Plan 17 and the German response.

Key Take-Away: The French Plan 17 was executed on schedule against the German border with no effort to cover a possible attack through Belgium. The attack was blunted by a German Army commander who did not want to concede German territory to the French even though that was part of the German plan in order to allow French forces to move away from Paris and the German invasion of northern France.

3. Describe the Belgian response to invasion by Germany.

Key Take-Away: The leadership of King Albert, once installed in the role of Commander-in-Chief, and Belgian patriotism led to a courageous defense by the small Belgian Army. While insufficient to stop the German forces, the resistance threw off the German time table, which jeopardized their overall plan.

4. Describe the British response to the German invasion of Belgium.

Key Take-Away: British political indecision led to a delayed response for the deployment of military forces which affect how those forces could be employed.

To the Discussion Leader: Discussion II assumes those in attendance participated in Discussion I or at least have read the material for Discussion I. The Discussion Leader should attempt to use the material in the first discussion to enhance Discussion II.

Assignment/Discussion for III – Battle Operations Leading to Stalemate on the Western Front

Prep Work: Read Chapters 11-22, pp. 191-524 [354 pages]

Overview: Chapters 11-14 and 17-22 address military operations on the Western Front. Chapters 12-13 address military operations on the Eastern Front and the Battle of Tannenberg. Operations on the Western and Eastern Fronts could be addressed in a single seminar setting or covered separately.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe the military operations on the Western Front from a German perspective.

Key Take-Away: The German mobilization was the fastest and most massive, but the original plans were not implemented properly, the Belgian defense cost precious time and the British helped hold at the Marne and contain the German invasion.

2. Describe the military operations on the Western Front from a French perspective.

Key Take-Away: When Plan 17 failed and French forces were shifted to join with the British the German Army was contained. The Allied Army was large enough to meet the Germans across a broad front.

3. Describe the military operations on the Western Front from a British perspective.

Key Take-Away: Britain preferred to rely on the Royal Navy rather than a small regular army, but the Navy could not stop the German Army. The British Army made an important contribution to containing the German invasion and would soon expand to take on a large sector on the Western Front.
4. Describe the military operations on the Eastern Front.

Key Take-Away: Slow mobilization of the Russian Army limited early operations to a small force aligned against a small German force (most of the German Army was aligned against France). A superior rail system and better leadership, planning, and execution allowed the German Army to outfight the Russians in the first battle on the Eastern Front, resulting in encirclement at Tannenberg and decisive defeat. However that did not lead to a political solution and Germany would have to build a large army on that front to face the rest of the Russian Army as it mobilized.