Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *The Defence of Duffer’s Drift*? -

“*It was our fault, and our very grave fault, and now we must turn it to use,*
*We have forty million reasons for failure, but not a single excuse!*”

- KIPLING

*The Defence of Duffer’s Drift* is a very short study on the art of independent, small-unit operations. Regrettably, its 1899-1901 Boer War setting has led some critics to claim that it is outdated. What’s more, in 1988, James R. McDonough, wrote a modern parallel version titled, *The Defense of Hill 781: An Allegory of Modern Mechanized Combat*. Although this new version substitutes a late 20th century American Mechanized Task Force for a turn of the 20th century British reinforced rifle platoon, the original still offers plenty of wisdom for the small unit leader. In fact, the original *Duffer’s Drift* may be more relevant as our current operational environment makes it more likely that a junior officer or SNCO will be leading a small unit on distributed operations than a Lieutenant Colonel will fight a large, mechanized battle on an open desert.

This book is significant to junior officers and SNCOs in that it illustrates the deadliness of complacency in an uncertain environment. Though the Commandant’s Professional Reading List website states that only three of the twenty-two lessons presented are still current, it is not the specific lessons learned that are important; but rather the manner in which they were derived; and that process is just as important now as it was during the Boer War. The protagonist is a young British Lieutenant who receives his first command as an order to detach a reinforced platoon of 50 men and defend a ford against any enemy that might be operating to the rear of their column. The lieutenant is taken through a series of scenarios in which he is defeated by the enemy, but carries lessons learned from each previous scenario to improve upon the next. While most of the specific lessons are antiquated, the real value of the book is seeing how the protagonist continues to evaluate the terrain, the enemy and his environment to develop a better defense. Though the book is laden with humor, its message is deadly serious.

Though the story progresses through a series of dreams, the author is actually depicting a very basic level of war-gaming. The hapless protagonist is forced to “re-do” each dream remembering nothing from the previous dreams except the specific lessons learned. Through this process it takes six dreams before the Lieutenant achieves success, and even then-realistically-it doesn’t all go according to plan. *The Defence of Duffer’s Drift* allegorically describes the iterative process that a small unit leader, without the benefit of a staff, must employ to successfully anticipate how his plans will fare against a thinking enemy. It also stresses the importance of the continuous evaluation and improvement of a position. Although weapons and technology have changed since the Boer War, the underlying concepts of *The Defence of Duffer’s Drift* are timeless.